



# ANTHROLATIONS



The Magazine of Anthropomorphic Dramatic Fiction

Issue #1 — January, 2000

U.S. \$6.00



## In This Issue:

**Many Years from Now - Part One**  
by Tim Susman  
Illustrations by Karena Kliefoth

**Butterfly**  
by M. C. A. Hogarth  
Illustration by Megan Giles

**Plus: Stories by Lanny Fields,  
Dekker Graden, Michael McGee,  
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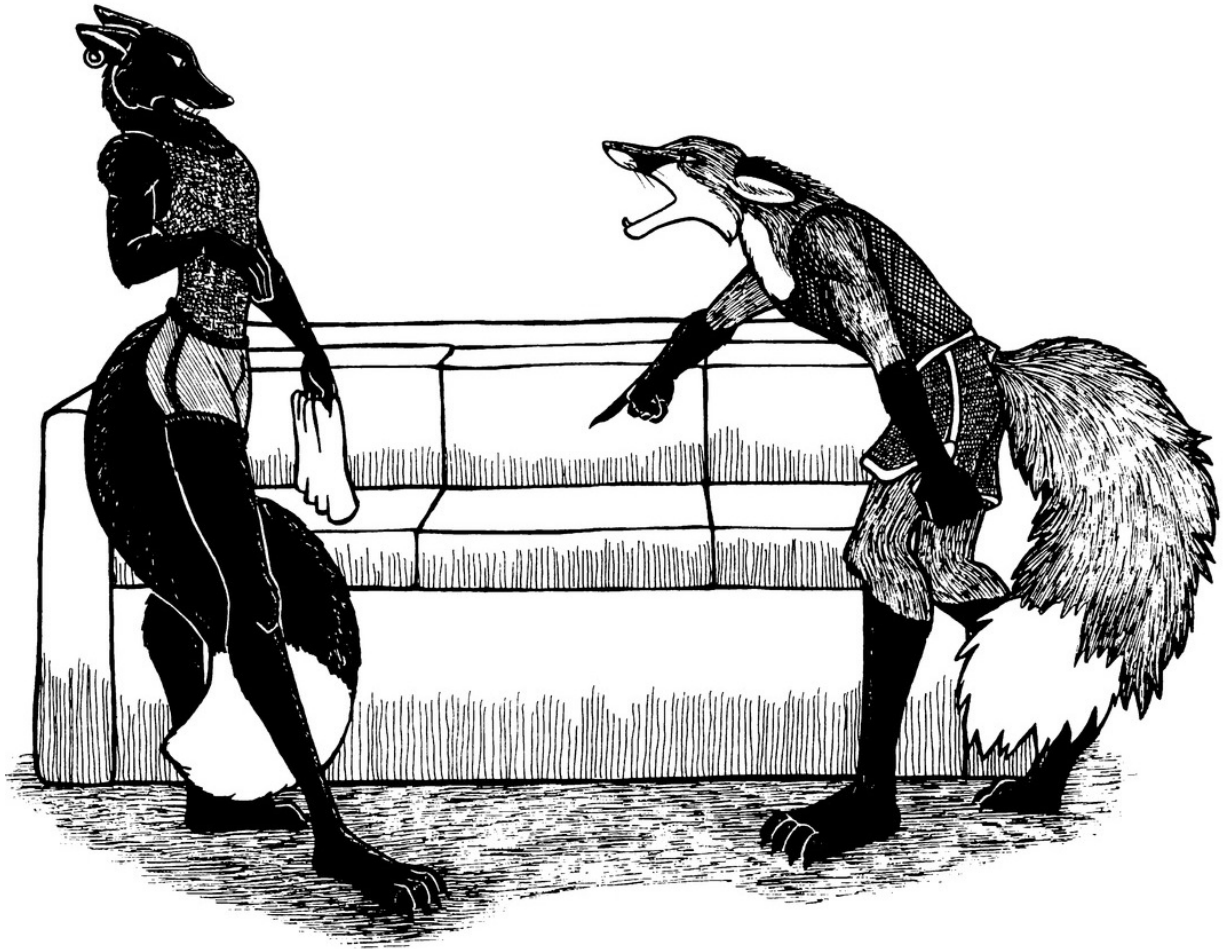
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# **About Us**

## **Editor – Publisher – Layout & Design:**

Jeffery Eddy

## **Co-Editor:**

Tim Susman

## **Printing by:**

Publisher's Graphics, LLC  
1701 Quincy Ave, Suite 12,  
Naperville, IL 60540  
(888) 404-3769

Anthrolations is published approximately twice a year by Sofawolf Press. We welcome submissions of original first-run fiction which features anthropomorphic or zoomorphic characters and explores their interaction with the characters around them. The optimum story will be 3,000 to 5,000 words – but longer or shorter stories are happily considered, depending on available space. Anthrolations also welcomes artists interested in preparing illustrations for accepted stories.

For more information about our guidelines and submission rates, please refer to the Sofawolf Press web site.

## **Subscriptions**

We regret that we are unable to handle subscriptions at this time. Anthrolations will be available for purchase at some conventions, or via mail order. See the Sofawolf Press web site for details.



## Notes from the Editor's Desk

It started simply enough...

"Are you thinking of submitting this to somewhere?"

"Not sure. Maybe. It's rather long. What venues are out there?"

I sighed. "Not a lot that would take something as long as this, or of this subject matter. Hmm... Getting the urge to restart my dreams of putting together a 'Zine."

"I'm always in favor of another magazine to showcase some of the better writing that goes on in the fandom. So go for it!"



What you hold in your hands is the end product of that simple beginning, coupled with months of hard work and some pretty lucky breaks. I thrust myself into the fray with a desktop publishing program, a willingness to learn, and my first story — Tim Susman's Many Years from Now. I had an idea what I wanted to accomplish — producing a professional looking literary magazine focusing on character interactions and the drama of day-to-day life. Sounded simple enough...

Well, it wasn't. The usual newbie questions of what fonts to use and how to get stories and art were quickly swept away by volumes of legal code and concerns about product positioning and marketing. On top of this, I was struggling to learn Quark X-Press, learning more about offset printing than I ever wanted to know, and activating long disused mental processes concerning design and layout. It may have taken a bit longer, and required rather more coffee than my doctor would have liked, but here it is.

I daresay I'm pleased with it. Some wonderful writers found the concept intriguing enough to lend their vision to the project, resulting in a mix of stories that fills out the sphere of the intended theme nicely. Inside we have interaction between siblings, best friends, old rivals, lovers, and teachers. The genres run from modern fiction to mixtures of SF&F, and the emotions examined are just as diverse. The stories come from well-known writers and from relative newcomers to the scene — and are excellent examples of the kind of fiction that I wanted to provide a spotlight for. To this already wonderful faire was added the excellent illustrative talents of several talented artists — again a mix of styles and notorieties.

I thank each and every writer and artist who made this first issue a success. However there are a particular few requiring a special note of thanks for their contributions above and beyond the material you see before you.

First and definitely foremost is the endless encouragement, support, constructive criticism, and hearty tail-kicking (when required) I received from the incomparable Tim Susman. It was the desire to showcase his talents that spurred me to action, but it was his unflagging friendship that made this a reality. Words just can't express enough gratitude.

When things seemed to be moving their slowest, along came Maggie Hogarth with story number two and years of experience in genre publications. The advice I received from her, on both legal and layout issues, was invaluable in making sure I did this as well as I have.

Shortly thereafter Karena Kliefoth became the first artist to grace the pages of the magazine with illustration, and gave me quite a bit of useful information on graphics formats and printing in the process. If I managed to make the illustrations look decent despite starting out utterly clueless, then much of the credit is hers.



Tiffany Ross joined up after I put out a call for artists on an art-archive newsgroup. In a remarkably short span of time I had some delightful husky-dog sketches for thematic filler, and more importantly, the fantastic logo graphics she designed from rough concept sketches by Tim. All were turned around on a dime and as responsively as a publisher could hope for.

Lastly, I mustn't forget to thank my Siberian Husky "Rio", who put up with my many, many hours of working on the computer instead of giving her my undivided attention. Despite many opportunities to destroy some portion of the offending computer equipment, she did not. As soon as this is off to the printers, we're going for a long walk in the woods together — the rest of you will have to make do with my thanks.

Enjoy! See you in issue #2!





# Many Years from Now part one

**Tim Susman**

I met Ricky at the Fur-Nace one Friday night at a time when I hadn't dated anyone in nearly a year and had been depressed about it for months. Marsha had gotten tired of listening to me bitch and dragged my tail out to a hot nightspot so I could "at least get laid". It hadn't worked, so I'd just become more depressed. She didn't seem to understand that none of the barely post-pubescent boys frolicking on the dance floor would want a twenty-five year old fox with two left hindpaws when they could have each other. Marsha was nothing if not persistent, however, and she dragged me back there two more times until finally she proved herself right.

I'd found a comfortable spot deep in the shadows near the bar, where I could watch the dance floor and not be too conspicuous. Marsha kept trying to drag me out — "Dammit, Andy, the point is for you to be seen!" — but I resisted. She's persistent, but I'm stubborn. I won. She threw up her paws in exasperation and went over to mingle with the other women in hope of hooking up herself.

Watching her go, I mused that she had nothing to worry about. As raccoons go, Marsha's pretty svelte, and she takes good care of her fur and tail. The crowd she hangs with go for earrings and piercings in a big way, but she limits herself to a couple gold hoops in her left ear. She also has these light brown eyes that I would kill for, and absolutely the cutest smile I've ever seen on any critter.

Now, take me by comparison. I'm short for a fox, standing just over five-two, and although I keep myself in pretty good shape, I never seem to be able to get the muscular bulges that these kids apparently get by drinking beer and dancing all night. My fur is a very plain red color, and I've always felt awkward about my ears. They're about one size too big, and as a result I get to hear every single comment people make about them. And my eyes... don't get me started! Other foxes have the most gorgeous amber eyes. Mine are brown. They don't sparkle, they don't light up, and not once has anyone ever made a comment about them.

So, when I saw Ricky dancing under the lights of the dance floor, on a summer night when the Fur-Nace was hotter than its name, I felt a longing without any hope. He was gorgeous. His fur was black with a silver sheen to it that caught the light and glittered spectacularly. I couldn't tell if it was natural or painted on. It didn't matter. The way he moved was natural, lithe, graceful, and damn sexy; and he had this way of turning his head so it looked like he was looking right at you invitingly. Not everyone was staring at him, but most of the ones who were moved up and tried to dance with him. He toyed with them and moved on, and after half an hour of watching him dance without a rest, I felt an ache somewhere between my stomach and my knees and had to get out of there.

I'd gone halfway down the street before I remembered that Marsha'd driven me there in her car. Cursing, I sat down on the curb, letting my tail spill onto the sidewalk. The night was hot and hazy, and the street was more or less deserted. I crossed my arms on my knees and sank my head down onto them.

I heard footfalls on the sidewalk, but didn't turn around. When they stopped behind me, I figured it was Marsha. "Can we just go home?" I said.

A paw rested on my shoulder, and I heard a short laugh. "That's rather forward, considering we haven't even met."

The voice wasn't Marsha's. I jerked to my feet and spun around. Ricky was grinning at my discomfiture as I tried to wipe the dampness off my seat and tail.

He was even more beautiful in that sultry summer night, if you can believe that. The silver was natural, I could see now, and it caught the soft streetlight glow just as it had caught the dance floor lights, highlighting his muscles and curves. He wore only a tank top and tight shorts, leaving very little to the imagination, but that didn't stop my imagination from kicking into gear. I stood there like an idiot gaping up at him — he was about six inches taller than me.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded and took control of my tongue. "Fine, fine. Thanks for asking." What would I say next?

"I was worried when you left that quickly." His smile had somehow made the transition from amused to concerned without a hitch.

"You noticed?"

"Well, you couldn't keep your eyes off me. I thought it would be rude not to stare back. Didn't you notice?" His white-tipped black tail swished behind him.

"I thought you were looking at everyone," I stammered.

"I was," he admitted, "but particularly at you."

"Why?"

He shrugged and smiled. "You were mysterious, hiding back there in the shadows. I wondered what you were hiding, or hiding from. You're not like all the others at the club."

I barked a laugh. "You can say that again. I don't know what I was doing there."

"Sometimes I wonder the same thing."

"Are you kidding? You belong there! The way you tore up the dance floor, you had every pair of eyes and ears locked on you..."

He tried to fake a shy smile, but he had too much self-assurance. He knew exactly how beautiful he was. "You really think so?"

"Trust me," I said. "You're gorgeous." He smiled, and I laughed suddenly. "And we still haven't met. My name's Andy." My heart was racing. I couldn't believe he was really interested in me.

"I'm Ricky." He extended a paw, and I shook it. His grip was confident and his paw was warm, very warm. We shook for a good fifteen seconds before giving up the pretense and just letting our paws rest together. His fingers played over the black fur on the back of my paw, and I rubbed his in return.

Finally, he looked down at my muzzle and grinned. "So. Now that we've met... still want to take me home?" It was obvious he'd done this before. I hadn't, not in years.

"I don't have a car... I mean, I do, but not here. My friend drove me." My ears lowered.

"I live with my parents," he said. "They let me come to the club, but I'm not allowed to bring home guys."

I whined. "We can catch the bus to my place, if you don't mind taking the bus."

He thought about that. "Mom always makes sure I have bus fare home. I think I have enough for two trips."

"I'll drive you home tomorrow," I said, and smiled really widely as it dawned on me that this was really happening, that I had met a guy — a drop-dead gorgeous guy — at a club and was going to take him home and have sex.

"Okay. Hey, do you have to tell your friend?"

Ouch. I'd almost walked off without telling Marsha I was leaving. She'd have worried all night. "Um... you wanna wait here?"

He nodded and squeezed my paw, then let go. "Don't be long."

I found Marsha pretty quickly. Rather, she found me.

"Andy? Where the hell did you go?" She stopped short when she saw my smile. "You didn't!"

"No, but I'm going to." I hugged her. "Thanks for driving me here, I'll tell you all about it tomorrow."

"Wait a minute. He's driving you to his place?"

"No, we're going to mine." "He's driving?"

I squirmed. "We're, uh, taking the bus." Outside it had seemed romantic and silly, the kind of thing lovers did in desperation to be with each other. Here it seemed squalid and foolish.

"How do you know he's not a hustler?"

My heart sank. Of course he was. I hadn't even thought of that. I'd be the perfect mark for a hustler — lonely, older fox in a crowd of young, desirable critters.

Marsha saw my ears droop. "Hey," she said, and pressed something into my paw. "Just in case he's not." She kissed me and then grinned. "Or in case you decide he's worth it. I'll get a ride home with Judy if you're not back in ten minutes."

I clutched the car keys gratefully. "Thanks, hon. See you tomorrow."

Miracle of miracles, he was still there when I walked out. "Listen," I said, and his ears lowered a bit as he heard the tone in my voice. I softened it somewhat. "I just want to...I mean, my friend thought I should ask..." I'd had it all worked out on the way out, but the words fell apart as I looked at him. I fidgeted. "I mean..."

He put a warm paw on my shoulder. "I'm not going to ask you for money, Andy. Maybe it seems weird that I'd approach you, but there was something

about you that intrigued me, and after talking to you, I think you're very sweet and I'd like to get to know you better. Is that okay?"

I nodded and flicked my ears. "How'd you know?"

He laughed. "I've been asked before. One guy just assumed, and gave me a fifty afterwards."

I chuckled and thought of something else. "So you are legal, right?"

"Nineteen. I can show you my license if you want."

I glanced at his tight shorts, and mine got a bit tighter just from the look. "Where on earth do you keep it?"

He laughed again, and brought his whiskers close to mine. "When we get to your place, I'll show you."



That's my prologue. We had some really fabulous sex that night, though in retrospect, any sex you have after six months of abstinence is de facto fabulous. I saw him again several times over the next week, and discovered we enjoyed spending time together even out of bed. Ricky moved into my place a month and a half later when he had a fight with his parents over getting an earring. I thought the silver looked very chic on him, though I resisted his efforts to get me a matching one. IBM is pretty gay-friendly these days, in that you can actually appear at company functions with your partner, but they still frown on "excessive adornment" in the workplace. They were willing to give me domestic partner benefits for Ricky, so I was willing to forego the jewelry. Besides, though I liked how earrings look on others, the last thing I wanted to do was draw more attention to my ears.

We settled into a sort of domestic existence over the next three years. He took some dance lessons down at the Cultural Center and three months later, he was teaching them. He taught me, too, and got me going to the gym, and bought me some fur care products, and eventually I started to think that I didn't look all that bad, except when I was next to him. We might not have been perfectly suited for each other, but we had romance and passion, so we made some compromises. He dragged me out to clubs more often than I'd want to go, and I dragged him to the movies more often than he'd want to go, and eventually it all became sort of routine.

One of the compromises that sat a little less well with me was the open nature of our relationship. Ricky knew damn well that I'd never get another partner, but every now and then he would see some guy that just made his heart skip a beat. "Andy, it's like this," he'd say. "If I don't sleep with him, I'll be thinking about him for weeks. Once I sleep with him, it's out of my system. And I promise I won't neglect you." I knew him well enough to know it was true. He pined for rock stars and ice skaters all the time. So I agreed. What the hell, right? It's only sex. I knew I had his love, and he assured me that wasn't going anywhere. And if I never saw it, I could almost pretend it wasn't happening.

The day it all blew up was about three and a half years after he'd moved in. He had been with two other guys already that year, and it was only May — he'd only done two all of last year. There were other signs that things weren't all right. It was getting harder to drag him to movies, for example, and I found myself less willing to go to clubs. I felt he'd just be there to look at other foxes, and I'd resent that. So already we were talking a little less, seeing a little less of each other.

I was in a company softball game that day. We have a league, IBM being so big and all, and my team was in second place. That day, we were playing the first place team, so we were all pumped up for it. It wasn't just that they were in first; it was also that most of my teammates were from my department, IT, and most of the first place team was from R&D. The R&D folks were absolutely the worst when it came to bugging us with stupid problems, and they had this hoity-toity attitude, like we had to drop everything when they called. You wouldn't think they'd be able to field a decent softball team, but somehow they did.

So we were psyched to go out and stick it to them on the field. Except that never really happened. I struck out twice, and muffed an easy grounder that let a run score, and I wasn't the only one stinking it up. By the end of four innings, the score was 13-1; after seven, it was 16-2, and they invoked the ten-run rule and called the game.

None of us were in the mood to do anything afterwards, so we just headed home, about an hour and a half early. I felt like shit and I probably smelled like it, too. My fur was all dirty and matted, and the only thing I was looking forward to was getting home, washing it off, and curling up under the dryer with Ricky.



I got in the front door, and the first thing I noticed was that the windows were all open. We usually kept them closed, because the smells wafting in from the city can be distracting and annoying. I could smell Ricky in the living room, so I walked in there and found him on his knees, wiping at something on the sofa. He looked up as I walked in.

"Hi, hon." He smiled and kept wiping.

"What'd you spill?" I asked, but a couple steps closer and I could smell what he'd spilled, and who he'd spilled it with. The musky odor was intimately familiar and unmistakable, and layered over it, not quite gone, was the scent of some male wolf.

He saw the realization in my ears and eyes, but tried to skirt it. "So, how was the game, hon? You're home early."

"Dammit, Ricky, you brought someone HERE?"

"Andy — " His ears flattened.

"You did! You brought him here and fucked him on our couch!" I made a show of sniffing the air. "Oh, no, I'm sorry — he fucked you on our couch."

"Look," he stood up and put his paws on his hips. "You know I do this. We talked about this."

"Yeah, but Ricky, not here! This is our place!" I was tired from the game and furious at him and I felt betrayed. I wanted to strangle him, and I wanted to sit down on the couch and burst into tears.

His ears went down, then up again, and I could almost see what he was thinking. He knew he'd hurt me, but if he backed down, he thought he'd lose some freedom. And, I think, he knew he'd done something wrong, but he probably thought I was overreacting. Anyway, he opted to argue instead of backing down. "What difference does that make?"

"It's our couch! Every time I sit on it now, I'll think about that wolf."

"That's why I'm cleaning up," he said, waving the rag.

"That isn't the problem."

"Oh, Andy," he said. "Don't be such a prude."

I almost did start crying, then. With some effort, I bit it back and walked past him to the bathroom. "If you don't understand, I'm not going to waste the time trying to explain it to you," I said as I passed him.

He followed me into the bathroom, fur bristling. "Don't give me that ivory tower crap, Andy. I'm not a child. Just because I didn't go to college, and

I'm not a professional..."

"Ricky, it's got nothing to do with that." I wasn't going to be able to hold back the tears very much longer. "Just get out of here and leave me alone."

He heard my voice cracking. "Is that what you want?" he said. I nodded, pressing my fingers to my eyes. The tears were still leaking out around them. "All right," he said softly, and backed out, closing the bathroom door.

It took me a couple of shaky minutes to compose myself. I started running the shower, waiting for the water to get hot, and stepped out of my filthy clothes. I was about to step into the steam and water when I thought I heard the front door slam.





I froze, listening intently. The apartment was silent. "Ricky?" I called through the door.

Nothing.

Shit. Shit shit shit. I opened the bathroom door and walked out into the apartment, naked. "Ricky?"

I couldn't smell him anywhere in the apartment. I looked just to be sure, and then looked in the closet, just on a hunch. Sure enough, his purple suitcase was gone. I ran to the front door and threw it open and took *a* couple steps into the hall. "Ricky!" I yelled, in case he was still in the stairwell.

The door across from ours opened, and a fox poked his head out. "What's the — " he said, and then stared at me. I realized I was still naked. Fur is modest, but it doesn't hide everything. We blushed at the same time and he mumbled "Sorry" as we ducked back into our respective apartments.

I stood there wondering what to do. I heard the shower still running, and realized I still looked and smelled terrible, so I thought I might as well get cleaned up. Five minutes in the shower reminded me that Ricky wasn't there with me, so I washed the shampoo out of my fur and got out as soon as I could. I turned the dryer on and lay down under it, letting the heat soak through my fur as I brushed it out. Meanwhile, I dialed Marsha on the speaker-phone.

"Hey, Andy, what's up?"

"Ricky's gone."

She paused. "Missing? Was he there when — "

"He walked out."

"Why?"

"We had a fight. Marsha, he brought someone over here! And I told him...I told him..." I suddenly realized what I'd said, and then I was talking through thick, hiccuping sobs, "I told him to get out, but I meant just the bathroom, just for him to get out of the bathroom, Marsha."

"Andy? I'll be right over. Just hold yourself together, okay?"

I nodded, then realized she couldn't see me. "Yeah. Okay." I kept wiping my eyes, as if it would help, and the frustration of the whole day just came pouring out. I cried for about ten minutes, and then I heard a tapping at the door. It was too soon to be Marsha. Maybe Ricky? I threw a towel around my waist and padded to the door, then sniffed the crack around it. It wasn't Ricky, but it was a fox, and what smelled like cookies. I put the chain on and opened the door a crack.

It was the fox from across the hall, holding a plate of cookies in his paws. He was a little taller than me, but not as tall as Ricky was. Ricky was better built and groomed, too — this fox was on the thin side, and what I could see of his fur looked matted in spots. One of his ears had been partially torn off, but the other was standing up nicely and free of earrings. His eyes were a pretty amber, even though they kept flicking down and couldn't meet mine for more than a couple seconds. He was wearing a loose Pride Day t-shirt and a pride ring necklace, just in case living in an apartment building on Fig Street — Fag Street, some people called it, either with disgust or with pride — wasn't clue enough.

"I, uh, heard you, and I thought," he fidgeted. "I was wondering if I could help at all...I had some cookies, and I thought they might cheer you up." His tail swished slowly along the floor. "I don't know if you need someone to talk to or anything." The words obviously took a lot of effort for him to say.

"Thanks," I said, "but I've got a friend coming over." His ears drooped. "I really appreciate the thought, though."

"At least take the cookies." He thrust the plate at me.

"All right." I unchained the door and took the plate from him. I saw his nose twitch as he looked around and sniffed me and the apartment, then he stepped back politely.

"My name's Mike," he said. "I live across the hall."

"I know, I saw you earlier." He looked down and blushed again. "Did you just move in?"

"Been here two months," he said. "I work at night, so I don't usually see people around."

"I'm Andy," I said. "Normally, I'd invite you in, but I'm in the middle of *a* really bad day." He probably had figured that out from seeing me yelling naked in the hallway, and the scent and sight of the tears on my muzzle.

He nodded. "Okay. Well, I hope you like the cookies." He started back to his apartment.

"Thanks," I called, and he smiled at me as he closed the door.

They were sugar cookies, pretty good, and I actually didn't cry after that until Marsha arrived. She brought Terry with her for extra support. Terry was a big black panther, who'd played football professionally for the Dragons for a couple years 'til he blew out his knee, and he used to amuse us endlessly with tales of closeted folks in pro sports. He was a really good guy, the kind you can always count on to know just what to say or do. Tonight was no exception: the first thing he did when he walked in behind Marsha was to pick me up by my waist and carry me over to the bed, where he sat me down and wrapped one huge arm around me. Marsha sat on my other side, and the two of them listened to me talk about my day. I didn't get ten minutes into it before the tears started up again. They were both very sweet, told me I was definitely in the right but that maybe I'd overreacted a bit, and they stayed with me until about one in the morning, when I started to doze off.

I called in sick to work the next day and lay in bed for a while. I wanted to call Ricky, but I didn't know where he was, and Marsha and Terry had told me several times not to call him until the weekend anyway. As it turned out, I didn't have to. The phone rang at 9:30. I knew who it was before I hit the speaker.

"Hi."

"Hi, Andy." He paused. "You weren't at the office."

"I called in sick." "Oh. Are you okay?"

"No. Yes. I don't know, Ricky. Where are you?"

"I'm at Lionel's. He's got a couch." Not that they were using it, I thought, and then stopped myself.

"Listen, Ricky — "

"No, Andy, I want to say something. I'm sorry for walking out on you." My heart jumped. "But I've been thinking," it sank again, "and I think maybe we could use a little time apart." When I didn't say anything, he kept going. "I mean, lately, we just seem to be drifting apart, and you're in a bad mood half the time (this wasn't true) and I spend more and more time away from the apartment (this was) and I just think there might be some serious differences between us."

I tried to think of something to say. It felt so strange to be lying in the bed where I'd woken up next to him a thousand times, and yet be talking to him through a machine.

"Andy?"

"I'm here."

He paused. "I still love you."

I bit my lip. "I love you too, Ricky," I said softly.

"I just don't know if I can live with you."

I stayed quiet. If Ricky'd gone home to his parents, I'd have tried to talk him back. Lionel was a mutual friend of ours and had been one of Ricky's flings last year. He worked out regularly at the gym where Ricky taught dance, and he was *a* pretty good-looking fox, though he wasn't in Ricky's league. The fact that Ricky had run to him meant that there was probably more going on than just our fight. That Lionel was a fox didn't necessarily mean anything, but I'd have felt better if he were anything else. Ricky fooled around outside his species, but I knew he'd only settle down with another fox long-term.

"Andy?"

"I don't know what I can say."

"Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about."

"No. I just thought we'd be able to work it out."

He paused. "I don't know, Andy. I think I need some time off."

"With Lionel."

Now it was his turn to be quiet. I didn't say anything either. Psych 101. Finally, he said, "I'll call you this weekend, Andy."

"Try not to get any stains on Lionel's couch," I said bitterly, and he hung up with a sigh.

For a couple hours, I lay in bed feeling sorry for myself and brushing my tail with my paws. I know it's a kid thing to do, but it usually relaxed me when I was stressed. It didn't work all that well this time though. A little before noon, hunger finally drove me out to the kitchen, where I fixed myself some eggs. I ate them at the kitchen table, looking out at the couch in the living room, and slowly I got angry all over again. I pictured that wolf going through my cupboards, listening to my music, and humping my boyfriend on the couch. It was a lot easier to get mad at him; my anger at

Ricky was confused with love and sadness and betrayal and, on some level, understanding, and it never lasted. I got myself worked up and good and angry, and before I knew it, I was on the phone to Goodwill asking them to pick up the couch. They wanted to know what condition it was in, and I told them it was in fine condition except that I couldn't sit on it anymore because my boyfriend cheated on me on it. Then they didn't want to take it, so I had to tell them that I was joking, that I was just getting a new one. They were okay with that until I gave them the Fig Street address, and then they started hemming and hawing about how they didn't do pickups in that neighborhood. I hung up on them and called the Salvation Army, who were not nearly as uptight. They said today happened to be their furniture day, and they'd either be here by five or next Wednesday morning.

I called my manager after that, since she hadn't been in when I'd called earlier. Janine and I get along really well — she's a good person as well as a good manager. Ricky and I had been over to her place and met her husband and kids a couple times. Very few things are cuter than lion cubs playing. Almost made me wish I had kids.

I told her what was going on, and asked if there was anything I needed to be in for for the rest of the week, or if I could work at home. She reminded me of a Thursday meeting about a project I was working on, but said that it was a minor meeting, and under the circumstances, I could skip it if I wrote up a briefing for her to give to someone else. I thanked her, said I'd download some of my project files and work at home, and promised I'd be in on Monday. She said she hoped things worked out with Ricky, and assured me that she didn't have any doubts about my professionalism. She has a deep growl to her voice that can be very reassuring — when she wants it to be.

While I was logging in to the work computer, I ate the last sugar cookie and figured I'd try to return the plate to Mike. I walked across the hall and tapped on his door, but there was no answer. He'd said he worked nights; maybe he was still asleep.

For the next few hours, I wrote up the briefing Janine wanted. The Salvation Army guys arrived at about quarter to five, and seemed surprised that the couch was in such good shape. I gave them a twenty to get them out the door faster, and at 4:55, the couch was gone from my life. I finished up the edits, and sent the briefing to Janine, then logged out for the day.



Terry called while I was finishing the report, telling me that he and Marsha were coming over again tonight, and that Misha would be coming too. He was Terry's boyfriend, and though they'd been together almost as long as Ricky and I, they still kept separate apartments. Misha was a Russian snow leopard who had played pro hockey for a couple years and still played in the minor leagues, trying to get back to the pros. He hadn't come by last night because he was tired out from a game, and because he wasn't as close a friend as Terry was. I was looking forward to seeing him, though. He was pretty silly and could always make me smile.

I tried straightening up a bit, and realized that I would have to go shopping for a couch that weekend. The living room was basically useless for more than two people to sit in, unless they wanted to curl up on the hardwood floor. I felt myself starting to get teary about the couch and moved myself into the kitchen, where I saw the cookie plate again and figured I'd return it before Terry and Misha got here.

This time, Mike answered his door. He looked even more rumpled than the day before, and had on a nightshirt with Celtic knotwork on it. "Mmf. Oh, Andy. Hi." His tail picked up a bit, and he managed a sleepy smile.

"Here's your plate back. Thanks again for the cookies. They were really good!"

"Oh, I'm glad you liked them." He took the plate and then stepped back half a step. I sniffed him and the apartment. It smelled like a bachelor's place, except that there was a strong odor of cookies and cake. He didn't look like he ate a lot of pastry, though. Maybe he gave it all away.



The furniture was definitely late college student. He actually had a couch, but it was either secondhand or inherited from his parents. His stereo system was pretty nice, and he had lots of books, from what I could see and smell. I was about to step back when I noticed the movie poster.

"Hey, you liked "Fox In The Rain"?"

He smiled. "Yeah. It's one of my favorites. You've actually seen it?"

"Sure! I really like Tabor's stuff. He's a great director. Did you see "A Life To Regret"?"

"Oh, yeah! It was pretty cool, though I didn't like the ending as much."

"Really? I loved it." I started talking about it, and he interrupted me.

"Want to come in for a bit and sit down?"

I glanced back at my door. "Sure, but can we leave your door open? Some friends are coming over and I don't want to miss them."

He nodded, and I could see in his eyes that he wanted to ask about my situation, but he refrained. Very classy. He offered me a drink and we sat on his couch talking about movies for about an hour. He'd taken *a* couple film classes in college, which I'd always wanted to do, and he knew about a couple obscure films that I'd wanted to see but never had. The cool thing was that he liked trashy movies too, and despite his scraggly fur, he was kind of cute when he blushed and admitted that he owned "Death! Death! Death!" I told him about a couple of my favorite horror movies and trashy comedies, and was just doing one of the routines from "Three Foxes and a Giraffe" when I saw Terry and Misha in the hall. Terry was going topless, wearing only a snug pair of jeans. Misha was wearing a hockey jersey and shorts, and his thickly furred tail was swinging all over the corridor. His team must've won last night.

"Hey guys!" I jumped up from the couch and waved to them. They turned and came to the doorway, looking in. Mike followed me to the door.

"Guys, this is Mike. He made the cookies I had last night, Terry. Mike, this is Terry and Misha, two dear friends of mine."

"Great cookies," Terry said, shaking Mike's paw. His huge feline paw dwarfed Mike's slender vulpine fingers. "Mix?"

"No, from scratch," Mike said. "I bake a lot." He'd gotten shy again, ducking his muzzle away from the two cats. I couldn't tell if it was normal or if he was just self-conscious about meeting someone in his nightshirt.

"This is nice place," Misha said when it was his turn to shake.

"It's kinda small, and I don't clean as much as I should." Mike's ear came up at the compliment, anyway.

"You kidding? In Russia, this is luxury suite!"

The young fox smiled, and relaxed a bit. He looked at the three of us, and then said, "Well, I ought to get cleaned up for work. I don't want to intrude."

Terry nodded. "Nice to meet you, Mike." Misha smiled.

"Pleasure to meet you, too. Thanks for returning the plate, Andy."

"I'll see you 'round, Mike," I said. "Thanks again for the cookies."

"We're going to watch a movie," Terry announced when we were back in my place. "We brought some alcohol, and you," he poked me in the chest with a large black paw, "are going to get drunk."

"I have beer, Terry," I said.

"Yes," Misha said, "but you do not have this!" He pulled a bottle of Smirnoff vodka out of his bag dramatically, then lowered his voice and shielded it with his body. "In Russia, you know, men kill for this."

I laughed. "Okay, but I'm not drinking vodka straight."

"We brought three kinds of berry juice," Terry said. "We'll find one you like."

Marsha came over about half an hour later with Chinese food, when I'd already tasted each of the juices with vodka twice and settled on the one I liked. I was starting to slur my words already, so they cut me off until after dinner. We ended up watching "Three Foxes and a Giraffe," because I'd been thinking about it, and Misha and I got completely trashed. I think we were singing my old school fight songs, except Misha of course didn't know any of the words and so he just yelled in Russian and claimed he was singing a translation. I don't remember them leaving.

The alarm the next morning felt like a big butcher knife shoved right into my skull. I killed it with a frantic paw and lay back in the blessed silence. Eventually, I made it to the bathroom and crunched some aspirin, and I was back at the workstation being productive by nine. The day crawled by as I tried to focus on work to avoid thinking about anything else. Glancing around the study a couple times, I thought I should've gone in to work after all, because then I wouldn't have anything to remind me of Ricky. I knew I wouldn't have been able to concentrate any better there, though.

Around three I just gave up and curled up in bed to watch a movie. Some slapstick comedy took my mind off things pretty successfully. At five-thirty Mike tapped on my door, and I invited him in. He didn't look too bad today, dressed in work clothes: slacks and a casual shirt. The yellow shirt set off his orange fur nicely.

"Let's sit in the kitchen," I said.

He glanced at the living room. "What happened to your couch?"

"Long story."

"Oh. Well, I just came over to ask...urn, I wanted to go see "Desert Paradise" when it opens tomorrow, and I thought I'd ask..." He couldn't finish the question, but his fidgeting finished it for him.

I smiled. "I'd like to see it, but I'm not sure I'm up for a date. I still have to work things out with my boyfriend."

"Not as a date!" He looked up at me. "I mean, just 'cause I'd like someone to go with. I hate going to movies alone, but I haven't really met many people. At least, any who'd wanna go." The rings on his necklace clinked together as he shook his head. "I can understand, though, if you wouldn't feel okay."

"Hang on. Let me think about it for a minute." I grabbed a bottle of juice from the fridge. "Want something to drink?"

"Water is okay."

I poured him a glass of water and thought about it. I didn't expect to hear from Ricky, but even if I did, was there any harm in going to a movie with a friend? Besides, Mike looked like he could use a friend. The only problem was that Terry and Marsha were sure to want to do something Friday.

"Don't you work nights?"

"Not until eight. We could hit a six o'clock show and I could go straight to work from there."

I smiled. "All right, I'm game."

He smiled back, and I saw his tail start swishing back and forth. "Great! Thanks."

"When should we leave?"

"About quarter after five, I'd say."

I nodded. "Okay. I'll be ready."

We talked for a little while after that about the other movies Raymond Martin had been in (he was the rugged vulpine star of "Desert Paradise"), and then moved on to other topics. Mike wasn't all that into sports, but he liked the occasional baseball game. We discussed whether or not the Falcons would take the pennant this year, and I asked about his job (he worked as a data processor doing overnight reporting) and he asked about mine (database analyst). We didn't talk about our social lives at all. At six-thirty, he pushed back his chair and sighed.

"I need to get something to eat before work," he said. "But it's been fun talking to you."

"Yeah," I said, standing with him. My stomach growled. "Hey, where are you going to eat?"

"Fast food." He looked down and flicked his ears. "I like to bake, but I don't cook all that much. It's a pain to cook for one."

"Mind if I join you?"

His ears went up again. "No, that'd be cool!"

We talked more over greasy chicken and I found out he'd majored in literature in college and taught himself computers when he realized that the highest paying job offered to B.A.s in literature was that of librarian. I told him about the Systems Engineering program I'd been through and the jobs I'd held since then. He left for work from the fast food place, and I found myself smiling on the way home.

I still missed Ricky as soon as I walked in, though. Knowing he wouldn't be there as I opened the door hurt. I picked up the phone to call Lionel's, but then put it down again. That night was a little better. Still bad, but better.

On Friday, I managed to get some work in. While I was uploading it, I checked in briefly with Janine to make sure the meeting had gone okay (it had). I fixed a light dinner for myself and was ready at quarter after five. Mike was right on time.

The movie was pretty good. Raymond Martin gave a terrific performance, as usual (and had us both drooling). We wanted to talk about it afterwards, but Mike had to run to get to work on time. I met Marsha at nine at a coffee house near her place.

Terry and Misha were out on a date, and I certainly didn't begrudge them their time together.

"So what are you going to say when he calls?"

"I don't know, Marsha. I just want him to come back." The good feelings from the movie had subsided.

She put her paw over mine. Her paw pads were warm against my fur. "Andy, I'm not going to tell you what to do. I just want you to think about it. I think you guys were a great couple, but he needs to grow up a bit."

"He is only 22. I'm six years older than he is."

"But he still acts seventeen, Andy."

"So what do you want me to do, Marsha? I can't be his daddy."

"People have to grow in relationships, Andy. I'm just telling you that you can't give in to him to get him back. He'll never learn that way, things will never change, and you'll end up at this exact same point again in a month or two." I bit my lip and whined softly through my teeth. "Are you going to be able to hold him to that, Andy?"

"I...I think so."

She narrowed her eyes. "Honestly?"

I winced and flattened my ears. "Don't make me say it."

"Andy, I'm your best friend."

I looked down at the table. "I'd do anything to get him back." She sighed. "Marsha, you don't know — it's like there's a huge hole in my heart. I've felt empty since he left, like my nights have no moon and the light's gone out of the sun. I don't know what to do."

She squeezed my paw gently. "That's beautiful, Andy. It was even more beautiful when Andrea Dome said it in "My Lover's Tail.""

I felt a warm flush. "I didn't think you'd seen that."

"Julie was into all kinds of romantic crap like that. She rented it one night."

"Well, it's true. I've lived with him for three years. I can't just be alone again. I know how much it hurts."

"I know, Andy, but believe me, you have to be strong here. I'm not going to give you that crap about you never being alone because you have your friends. Friends don't hold you in the shower and wash your back; friends don't keep an eye on you all the time and know when you need a hand held or a hug without you asking; friends don't put their arms around you after sex and share that wonderful feeling with you. But I will tell you that you're better off alone than with someone who's going to run around and, worse, have such a blatant disregard or incomprehension of your feelings. Gripes, Andy, I've cheated on girlfriends before and I never brought anyone back to my place."

"You never told your girlfriends about it beforehand."

"That makes it right, that he told you? Look, I don't know many successful open relationships, but I know of a couple. Both partners have to be okay with it, and both partners have to have other lovers for it to work. I'm not gonna say it's right or wrong. But obviously he's okay with it and you're not, and you just gave in so he wouldn't leave you. I told you that a year and a half ago, and you didn't listen. And even if you could make that work, he went and fucked some guy on your couch. That is just rude, Andy. And you've gotta face that."

I nodded miserably. "So what do I do?"

She tapped the table. "Look. What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Shopping for a new couch. Waiting for him to call."

"I'll come shopping with you and I'll sit at home with you. If he calls and you're doing okay, I'll go. But if you need me, I'll be there. Does that sound okay to you?"

"I could probably use the company." I smiled and squeezed her paw back.  
"Thanks, Marsha. I owe you one."

She finished her coffee. "Since when did we keep score? Anyway, remember when Julie left me for a male? You got me through that."

"You'd only been seeing her three months."

"What is this, a game show? Okay, you win, your relationship is more deep than mine was."

I grinned at her. "Okay, okay. So I'll see you in the morning?"

She kissed me on the nose. "Well, I'm not gonna spend the night on your living room floor, and I don't think you let us femmes in your bed, so I guess so."



***To Be Continued in Issue #2...***

*- Editor*





# Final Rest

**Lanny Fields**

Alcien Brightpaw crouched in the shadows, watching his squire Greystorm solemnly guard the rubble marking the spot where the East Tower of Kel'Dier had once stood. The night was cool and quiet, and the air was still damp from the brief shower two hours earlier, but the odor of burnt fur hadn't been washed away. Hearing voices across the courtyard, Alcien watched the silhouettes of the snow leopard's fellow guards as they walked along the Seawall above. Greystorm saw them too and sniffed, brushing condensation from his whiskers before turning back, shaking his head and gazing sadly at the too-large cairn.

I have to do this, Alcien thought to himself as he stared at his squire. The funeral for the fifteen who had died here would be tomorrow, but he had obligations to keep tonight. The wolf looked up at the moon, its crescent peak barely visible above the West Tower's battlements, then up at the new tower's foundation behind him. The sky was still dark, but only a few hours remained until sunrise.

Alcien paused as the snow leopard shuddered, huddled in his cloak. The knights called this the 'ghost watch' with good reason, according to the stories circulated amongst the knights and their squires. Foolish fears, but not so for one standing guard at their source.

He's probably wondering if the ghosts are walking tonight, Alcien thought as he stood. They are. The wolf reached into the waistband at the back of his pants and slid the dagger from its sheath.



Greystorm snapped to attention upon hearing the sound and held his staff at the ready, claws out and dug into the wood. He scanned all around the courtyard and missed the wolf's hiding spot. Alcien watched his squire step

back, whirling to stare at the rubble, then behind him again, just as quick. The wolf unfastened his cloak and let it fall to the ground. Then he made his move.

Greystorm heard his approach at the last minute and almost turned in time to see him. Alcien put the dagger to the snow leopard's neck and yanked the fur at the back of his head, exposing his throat to the night and the blade.

"If I were an enemy, you'd be dead, too," Alcien's voice hissed unpleasantly.

Greystorm trembled so violently that he almost lost his grip on his staff. "S-s-sir Alcien?!"

The blade was removed as quickly and as quietly as it had been placed at his squire's neck. Greystorm turned, his spotted tail brushing inadvertently across the wolf's knees, and gasped.

Instead of his usual attire of knight's armor or mage's robes, Alcien was dressed only in a pair of black pants which were loose enough to be comfortable, but tight enough to prevent them from flapping in the wind. Indeed, all that moved in the light breeze was the brown fur on Alcien's well-muscled upper body. Greystorm's whiskers quivered upon seeing the larger battle scars on the mageknight's torso, where the damage could not be hidden by the surrounding fur.

Alcien slid the dagger back into its sheath. He looked down at the snow leopard, who stood half a head shorter, and waited.

"Urn, is everything all right, sir?" Greystorm tried his best to make his voice sound normal. "Is there anything I can do to help?" The glazed look in Alcien's black eyes slipped right through him as if he weren't there. Greystorm sniffed again, standing rigidly at attention with the familiar-yet-unfamiliar wolf before him, motionless and thoroughly intimidating.

"Alcien?" he finally dared to whisper.

The mageknight blinked and inclined his head ever so slightly. The simple motion was enough to quiet Greystorm's jangled nerves and he relaxed even further as Alcien straightened up and opened his mouth to speak.

"You're relieved." Alcien's bleak voice was oddly muted in the open area.

"What? Sir? M-my apologies." The snow leopard's ears flicked back and forth frantically. "But my watch...my duty... please...."

"Go. Leave. I'm giving you the rest of the night off. Take the other two up there with you." Alcien walked past him, not even bothering to listen to his

subordinate's stammered reply. His tail swayed, keeping time with the cadence of the snow leopard's retreating footsteps, and stopped only after Greystorm had disappeared within the castle's walls.

Alcien turned, surveying the dark, desolate courtyard as though he were its lord and master. He nodded, satisfied, and waited impatiently for Greystorm to inform his comrades of their dismissal.

*You were a squire like him, once. Young and full of hope.*

Amidst the murmuring of the wind, Alcien imagined that he heard it spoken aloud. He's just a squire, the wolf thought. He doesn't understand. None of them do. And I *have* to do this. I can't go on, not without telling him goodbye. He stared forlornly at the rubble.

Alcien's ears perked up when he heard frantic whispers from the Seawall, followed by scurrying footfalls and the sound of a door closing. He walked slowly to the ruins of the East Tower and uttered a short, solemn prayer before kneeling and placing his hands reverently upon the cold pile of rocks. He had been gone for three days, and not by his choice. It was still his responsibility.

"It's not fair, you old bastard." Alcien tightened his throat to keep his voice from breaking. "You're really dead this time. Countless times, you saved my neck, and I couldn't even return the favor once, much less the one time you needed me."

*Why do you blame yourself?*

"I blame Tharseron." His entire body shook with anger. "My brother destroyed the tower and killed them. If I'd been here...if only I'd been here, I could have...."

*What could you have done?*

"...Defended the tower," he told himself bitterly. "Taken his place, my rightful place. If not for my absence, he would be alive right now." His muzzle touched his chest fur.

"Cedan." Alcien made himself say the name. Then he closed his eyes, fighting for control as unbidden memories seeped into his consciousness. One final, bleak thought came to him as he remembered.

I would have been the one to die instead.



"Are you afraid to die?"

"What?!" Alcien's jaw dropped, and for the first time since he started training to become a squire, the startled young wolf began to have serious doubts about his future. This was his final test — he couldn't fail now!

"Tch, cub, where are your manners?" the stern voice growled.

"What?" he repeated, flustered. "Oh. Sir. My apologies." Familiarity among equals, respect to your superiors, he reminded himself.

"That's better." The voice softened, but still retained a hard ring to it. Alcien watched the wolf walk around the table to stand next to the seated lord of Kel'Dier, Tancerret. Like the lion, the wolf had light, tawny-colored fur, though most of it was under a suit of armor which reflected light poorly, so battered was its appearance. To the young Alcien's eager eyes, it shone like the sun.

"Are you afraid to die?" the mageknight repeated his question.

Alcien did not hesitate this time. "Yes."

Tancerret turned and looked at the wolf, whose face remained unreadable.

"And no. Sir." Alcien thought he saw *a* smile hidden deep within those lupine eyes.

Tancerret glanced back at Alcien. "Explain yourself," he rumbled.

"To say that I am afraid to die is truthful, sir," Alcien said calmly, "but I am not afraid of death."

"You contradict yourself," the wolf replied in an equally calm voice.

"No, sir, I do not. The two are not the same."

"You are selfish, then. Willing to let others die in your stead. You would be undependable as a knight."

"No, sir. Like most creatures, I wish to keep living for as long as possible. In that regard, yes, I am selfish, and yes, I am afraid of dying; but I also know that death must eventually come for me, and when it does, I will be ready. That is what I do not fear. For myself or anyone."

"Interesting," the wolf murmured. "Tell me, Alcien, has death ever claimed anyone you've cared for deeply?"

"No," Alcien replied quietly. "Sir."

"It is nothing to be ashamed of. For knights, however, it is unfortunately all too commonplace." He scrutinized Alcien carefully. "I am concerned that you might not be aware of how much power death can have over the living."

"I think I have a fairly good idea, sir." Alcien felt his resolve begin to weaken.

"We shall see." The wolf straightened up and glanced at Tancerret, who nodded back. "Do you know who I am?" he asked formally.

Immediately, the young wolf knelt and bowed his head. "You are Sir Cedan Clearwater, mageknight and commander of the evening watch."

"True enough." He took a deep breath. "I have watched you, taught you. It is my judgement that you, Alcien Brightpaw, are worthy enough to become my squire, if you so choose."

Alcien placed his tongue between his fangs and bit down hard to make sure that he was wide awake. Sir Cedan's a mageknight, he thought breathlessly. That means that I'm going to be....

"Rassimen agrees," Sir Cedan said as if reading his thoughts. Rassimen was the head of the mages' order.

"I...um...accept the offer," Alcien said awkwardly. "Sir."

With that, the tension in the room lifted like the perpetual morning fog surrounding Kel'Dier. "Then your first task will be to join the other squires in training tomorrow," Sir Cedan said gravely.

"Not today?" Alcien asked fearfully.

"You have the rest of the day to pack up and move into your new room. In the squires' quarters."

Tancerret nodded and motioned for Alcien to rise, which the young wolf did gratefully. "Are you sure he's ready?" the lion asked the mageknight. Alcien's ears flattened at the question.

For the first time since being called into Lord Tancerret's chambers, Alcien saw a small smile spread across the other wolf's muzzle. "As I told Alcien, my lord, we shall see."



"You were right, Cedan," Alcien said quietly. "I wasn't as prepared for death as I thought I was. Then...or now. And it just doesn't get any easier, does it?" The mageknight snorted softly and answered for himself. "No. It never does."

Alcien flinched as a door behind him was opened violently and with such force that it slammed against the stone with a loud bang. He reined in his temper and refrained from turning to see who the intruder was, but his ears betrayed his curiosity, moving instinctively to track multiple footsteps emerging into the courtyard. They halted and Alcien's fur stood on end as a soft voice filled with seething rage announced itself to him. "None of these guards, including Greystorm, were on your watch. They were on *mine*. By what right do you think you can harass and dismiss them from their assigned posts?"

The mageknight rose and turned to face his accuser, a tall vixen with fur so red that she seemed wrought from glowing embers and given the lithe shape of a fox. One of her coal-black paws fingered her sheathed scimitar suggestively.

"My apologies, Sir Cassinder Firemane," Alcien intoned formally and through clenched teeth. He saw Greystorm and the other two standing a good number of paces closer to the open door and nodded in the snow leopard's direction. "And to your guards."

"Drop the 'Sir', Alcien. Why did you do it?"

"I needed to be here alone."

"All you had to do was ask." The tone of voice softened, but her paw rested firmly on the sword hilt. "You seem to be taking Sir Cedan's death rather hard," she said bluntly.

"Wouldn't you?" Alcien shot back. "If someone as dear to you were murdered, and by one of your own siblings...."

"I'd feel the loss, yes, any of us would, Alcien!" Her eyes flashed with the same angry color of her fur. "But if the circumstances demanded it, I would also be able to put their death aside and keep going."

"That's heartless," Alcien growled, clenching his paws. His muscles bunched and tightened from the rising tension. His dagger seemed to dig into his backside and he reached behind to adjust it. His paw lingered.

"No, that's part of our job." Cassinder stood her ground. "There's always time to grieve later."

"Perhaps *you* can sequester your feelings away in some unreachable part of your mind, but I cannot." His voice was heavy with the emotions that weighed down his heart, and the sound of it sent Cassinder into her own brooding silence. Off in the distance, the smithy had started up again, and



the spell-muted ringing of metal on metal echoed like tiny bells in the courtyard.

I can't go on. Not without telling him goodbye.

"I have to leave now," he said simply and turned northwestward.

"Alcien!" The wolf paused. "I'm going to remind you of something I know you've heard before: 'Our loved ones may die; they might not be with us anymore, but they'll be in our hearts and memories forever.' That's what I'm trying to tell you, Alcien." He heard the vixen walk toward him and he flinched at the touch of her warm paw on his wind-chilled shoulder. "You'll never forget Sir Cedan through the rest of your days, I know, but you've got to get out of the past and start living in the present. Or else, you won't have a future."

She's right, Alcien thought bitterly. That's my problem — always preoccupied with the past. And her words....

Cedan had uttered those words, at another funeral. Years ago.

A lifetime ago.

"Good night, Cassinder," was all he said and continued to walk away. He was not surprised that they did not try to follow him.

The coastal fog had begun its nightly journey inland and Alcien noticed wispy strands floating through the air, like the advance scouts of some intangible army. He could no longer see Than'Dier, the mages' tower at the south end, but he strolled through the practice grounds where the squires and knights trained and he passed by the armory. He reached the smithy, which was always working, day or night.

Alcien peered inside. A panda who looked very much the epitome of the blacksmith was bent over an anvil, tapping out imperfections in a block of metal with his large hammer. "Yes?" he said gruffly without looking up.

"Is Silverstripe here?"

The panda shook his head as he quenched the block. "He's not in tonight. I'm taking his place." The water hissed and spat steam in protest. "Is that you, Sir Alcien?" He set the cooling metal aside and put on a thick pair of glasses.

"Yes," the wolf said quietly. If the old badger wasn't here, then what was he to do?

There was one other way to say goodbye, he realized. His tail drooped at the thought.

"Tell him I said that I'm...I'm sorry."

"For what?" the astonished blacksmith asked.

"His son." Alcien turned and padded away slowly, continuing north. The smithy remained quiet as the wolf continued on.

Further ahead were the stables and beyond that, the main gateway on Kel'Dier's north side. It was a large, arched area between the twin towers and because of the late hour, its thick portcullis was down and locked protectively into the ground. Alcien halted just before the barrier and put his paws in the openings created by the interlocking bars of metal. He gazed at the fields outside the walls for a moment, then turned his head upward to stare thoughtfully at the top of the arch. The guards who controlled entrance and egress to Kel'Dier through the portcullis were situated in a room there.

Better if I didn't disturb my fellow knights this time, Alcien thought. Besides, this should be far enough away. He released the portcullis and stepped back. The relative silence of the night was broken as Alcien began to cast a spell.

*...memories forever...*

Alcien gritted his teeth and forced himself to stay focused, pushing the memories back. The spell finally took form and he slowly lifted his right paw, pads up, until it was level with his shoulders. Grey energy surrounded him, closing him off from the rest of the world and when it dissolved, Alcien was standing in a small, tree-ringed glade. Kel'Dier had been left far behind.

Alcien strolled away from his point of arrival and took in his surroundings. Nature's wildness was strong here and it teased his senses. Moonset had left many shadowed areas of blurred indistinction. Alcien looked to his right and found the thin trail that wound back through the trees. Sharp odors from evergreens mingled with the perfumes wafting from the brightly colored wildflowers. He tasted the cool, crisp forest air — how different it was from the moisture-laden ocean breezes! Alcien broke into a run, stumbling along the path recklessly, trusting his instinct to carry him to his destination.

Bushes and branches scraped bare fur, drawing thin lines of blood as the wolf mindlessly forced his way through. Alcien fell to his knees after emerging into the grand clearing, bowing his head and closing his eyes with a reverence that was half awe and half desperation. He noted with detached

fascination that he was not even panting after the long, difficult run. He pulled the dagger from its sheath and held it tightly.

"It has been a long time, Alcien," a voice murmured into his ear, "and your presence has been missed."

Alcien's eyes opened in shock. Lintais!

The mageknight rose shakily, allowing himself to be supported by the tall creature who had silently approached. The stag was clad only in a short, white wraparound which exposed slender legs from the knees down and was secured around the waist with a silver clasp in the shape of a tree. Dark amber eyes watched the wolf with concern.

"Missed?" Alcien repeated numbly. "Even after...?"

"Yes," Lintais interrupted and took the dagger from the wolf's paw, stowing it in the waistband of his wraparound. Then he put his hands on the wolf's shoulders, lowered his head, and lightly touched the base of his antlers to the mageknight's forehead. Alcien immediately closed his eyes.

"O Great Spirits. We are grateful for the return of our brother. Long has his journey been and many are the paths he has tread, all under the watchful eyes of the Sun, our father, and the Moon, our mother. We give thanks and ask that he may be allowed to say goodbye to his friends and continue to walk the road of his destiny."

Alcien brought his muzzle up and looked at Lintais. "You know about Cedan?"

"How could I not?" the stag said softly and helped Alcien to his feet. "You brought him here with you."

"What?" Alcien started and whirled. "Where? Where is he?" He turned back to Lintais.

The stag shook his head. "And there is someone else that you left behind here, long ago."

Alcien's ears folded back. "Oh. Yes."

Lintais started walking and Alcien followed. "Where are we going?" the wolf asked as they left the clearing and descended a gentle slope.

"Walking the road of your destiny," Lintais replied with a smile. "Tell me what happened, the last night I saw you."

Alcien shook his head. "You were there."

"Not the whole time." The wolf remained silent as the forest thinned out in front of them. Soon, they emerged from the tree line and gazed upon the

Wakinyan Plains. Alcien paused and looked over the savanna that stretched all the way to the Matopeh mountain range. The jagged peaks were stark and threatening, even from this distance.

"Jaerel," Alcien said softly. His turned his head to the east, where the sky was already turning greyish-blue. The campsite was still the way he remembered it, charred like a stain upon the beauty of the Minato's lands. His mark, left for all to see.

The stag led Alcien toward it. "It was the eighth night of your vigil," he prompted.

"The final night," Alcien sighed. "I met up with Jaerel after finishing my evening meditations. Our duty was to assist you with regenerating the spells that protect all of your lands."

"Giving part of yourself to become part of the land for all time," Lintais said reverently.

"And your protégé was there. Tyiar was his name. He was watching the three of us feed our energies into the nexus. If he hadn't been there, he wouldn't have been able to warn us. I tried... to...." The wolf stared at the ash beneath his bare feet...

*...and remembered.*



"He's alive!"

Alcien awoke to the welcome sight of Sir Cedan Clearwater, peering anxiously over his prone form. The squire sat up and yelped, his side spasming at the sudden motion.

"Feeling better, Alcien?"

The injured wolf wasn't sure whether his patron was deadpanning or not. "Better than I probably should be, sir," he said cautiously.

"Aye," Sir Cedan nodded once. "Jaerel Silverstripe is dead," he said quickly.

Alcien sagged, stunned by the news, and took a good look around. He was outside — in fact, he was still at the campsite, probably exactly where the explosion had thrown him. The ground beneath him was scorched black and he smelled burnt fur mixed with the ash. His mind replayed the last moments and he felt a knot burn in his chest.

"It's all my fault," he rasped.

Sir Cedan had followed his squire's gaze across the campsite and he now looked back, concerned. "I talked with Lintais. He doesn't think so. And I agree."

"But...I panicked...! withdrew too early...."

"There was no way the three of you could have pulled out safely, or repair the nexus before it fully deteriorated. You may have acted hastily, but if you hadn't, no one would have been able to cast any sort of shielding spell, and there would be four dead instead of one.

"And your vigil is done." A sad smile emerged on the mageknight's muzzle. "I hate to do this in the wake of everything that's happened here, but...." He laid his paws on the other wolf's shoulders. "Rise, Sir Alcien Brightpaw."

Alcien shrugged away, his ears flat with shame. "I don't deserve it," he said in a hoarse voice. "I don't want it."

"Others have died before under your command," Sir Cedan reminded him.

"Never like this! Never when it was my fault."

Sir Cedan grabbed Alcien's arms and pinned them to his sides. He glared into his former squire's eyes and was shocked to see something there he thought he'd never see. Fear.

"It was not your fault, Alcien!" he whispered fiercely .

"I got lucky...."

"You can't give up. If you do, then...."

"Jaerel's death will be meaningless?" Alcien finished with a bitter laugh. "It already is."

"It's not!" Sir Cedan's growled with frustration. "Think of all the good you can do, that you've already done. Remember what I told you in Lord Tancerret's chambers when I made you my squire?"

"This isn't some test! This is real!"

"You can't let a close friend's death cripple you, Alcien! I won't let you bury yourself alongside him!"

Alcien grabbed the other wolf's throat in one paw and shoved, tripping him over a conveniently placed leg. "What I do with my life is my own business!" Alcien snarled down at him. "S...." He caught himself before acknowledging Cedan as his superior. Not any more.

"I'll be at Kel'Dier, Cedan," he said coldly. "There's nothing left for me here." Sir Alcien stood and turned his back, leaving his former mentor and the Minato further behind with each determined step.



Alcien looked steadily into the stag's eyes. "I don't blame myself for Jaerel's death anymore."

"Perhaps," Lintais said in an infuriatingly calm voice. "Yet you are anguishing over Sir Cedan's death just you did Jaerel's."

"I'm not!" Alcien shouted. "Why does everyone keep saying that?" He stopped, surprised at hearing himself sound like a petulant, whining cub. Then he remembered Cassinder and her words. She was right.

"You're right, Lintais," he said meekly.

"There's someone who has been waiting a long time to see you," the stag said. He whistled two notes, the second an exact octave above the first. A familiar shape separated from the shadows and walked over to Alcien.

"Greetings, Sir Alcien Brightpaw." The other wolf kept his voice low, but Alcien could still hear the deep baritone resonate with perfect pitch.

"And to you, Tyiar," the mageknight replied, astounded by how little his friend seemed to have changed. Except for growing up, he corrected himself. "It's good to see you after so long. How goes your training?"

"Fine." The black-furred wolf nodded. "Learning the lore of the Minato is quite a challenge."

"He has also learned to attune his music to his magic," Lintais added.

Alcien blinked, as if seeing Tyiar in a whole new light. "A magesinger?"

The younger wolf's tail wagged and he blushed. "Yes."

"It takes a lot of dedication. Almost as much as a mageknight," Alcien rubbed his muzzle and thought of his own hardworking squire, Greystorm. "Do you know enough to give me a demonstration?"

Tyiar glanced at Lintais, who silently nodded permission. "Very well." He turned back to Alcien, his demeanor completely serious. He began to hum. "A song to heal, I think," he said softly.

Alcien was enchanted from the moment Tyiar began his soft crooning. At first, he listened to the words with his ears forward and his head slightly

cocked to one side. His tail drooped as the accompanying melody relaxed him further and a few notes later, the mageknight realized that he would not be able to remain standing. "What...?" was all he managed to utter before his legs gave way, forcing him to sit. Then the song changed.

Something deep inside Alcien opened up and before he could take it back, Tyiar's singing caught it and pulled it away. A small glowing cloud took shape, the same way another mage's illusion might have done. The cloud expanded, losing cohesiveness, and when it was gone, it had left a translucent scene in its place. Alcien stared at a miniature version of his own personal nightmare, brought into the open for all to see.

It was the last night of his vigil. A younger Alcien, Jaerel the badger, and Lintais were spread around the fire. In the middle of the triangle was a large gem, hovering above the fire. It had a crack in its side, which widened just as the miniature Alcien shouted something, his paws moving in a frantic attempt at spellcasting. A second later, the gem flashed white, searing everything.

A new scene coalesced before Alcien's eyes.

He saw fiery explosions rip the East Tower apart from within. He hadn't been there, but everyone had told him what had happened. He reached toward the illusion, wanting to help, to be with them. His paws passed through the ghostly tower, the screams of the dying all too audible until it finally crumbled and silenced them forever. Then it changed again.

This time, it was a funeral. Alcien watched, dazed, as the procession marched through Kel'Dier's courtyard, but there was no sense of familiarity about the event. Except.... He focused his attention on the bearers, and was surprised to see Cedan at its head. The old wolf was followed by Tancerret, Jaerel, and many other squires who'd lost their lives. Some had even been under his command. Then he saw his mate Cerith, then Doran, Rassimen, Damocus, Cassinder and Greystorm. Even the human, Alex, had joined in, walking beside the solemn group of Alcien's friends. The procession halted in the middle of the squires' practice grounds and Alcien watched the enclosed litter open. He knew exactly who was going to emerge from it. Himself. Alive.

Alcien moaned, unable to look away as the illusory funeral attendees rushed forward and tore the smaller Alcien apart like wild animals. Magic could not aid this facsimile of himself and within seconds, there was nothing left of him except for a quivering mass of bones and flesh, still alive

and in excruciating pain. Their justice. Then their ghostly paws reached up, trying to claim the real mageknight as one of their own. *And his own paw was stretching back toward them...*

Dawn broke over the plains. The song reached a crescendo and the image disappeared in the morning light. Alcien felt all of the guilt, all of the grief, and everything else he'd hidden suddenly burst forth, not as spectacularly as the gem's explosion years ago, but just as devastating. He turned away, whimpering and unable to bear the sight of his two friends as they stolidly watched his emotional release. Tyiar finished his song, but continued to hum soothingly as he knelt and put his arms around the older wolf's shoulders. "It's all right, Alcien," he murmured into the mageknight's ear. "Say your goodbyes."

Alcien returned the hug fiercely and cried.



The real funeral proceeded differently from the vision Alcien had witnessed the night before, much to his relief. His closest friends stood next to him with their heads held high; proud, yet respectful. The mageknight even saw Alex peering from a window. The dead were in their proper places, too. With bright eyes, Alcien listened to his friends echo the words Sir Cedan Clearwater had spoken at Jaerel's funeral, years ago.

"Our friends may die; they might not be with us anymore, but they'll be with us in our hearts and our memories forever."

"Yes, Sir Cedan," Alcien murmured as he watched a shaft of pure white light, summoned by the mages, descend from the heavens and ignite the pyre of his teacher and friend. "I'll keep you alive in my heart and memory."

Forever.



***Dedicated to the memory of Chris Peterson.***





# Butterfly

**M.C.A. Hogarth**

"I can't believe Father's actually gone," Geneviive murmured to her brother as their tollies long-walked shoulder to shoulder.

"Good riddance and Godspeed," Jared answered firmly.

"Jared!"

The Hinichi man glanced down at his sister, ears slicking back beneath their frost-guards. He could barely see her lupine face through the modesty veils the brittle summer wind lashed around her delicate face. "Oh, decherna, admit what is only the truth. We were a sathet household before Grandfather died, almost down to the last servant in the stables. It was our belief. When Father came, he only alienated people by preaching the pruscha sect. Dahrengard was never poured to be pruschani, whatever Father wanted."

"And now he's gone," Geneviive said again, ears sagging. She did not deny her brother; she never bothered when she knew he was right. "Now we are the Dahrengard-scain."

"Lord and lady of the Heights," Jared agreed, watching the empty wagon bobble over the uneven, frosted road. His eyes sought the shadowed streaks of the keep, black towers melting in ragged cuts in the icy mountainside. A fitting home for the Hinichi wolfines. He licked his nose once. "Now we can set everything right."

The smaller woman started. Her voice dropped to a low hiss, barely trusting the wind to keep the words from the ears of unsuspecting relatives and servants walking before them. "Everything? Everything, Jared?"

He returned her gaze, eyes a blue somber as river stones. "Everything, decherna." His face turned in profile to hers, as he watched the approaching road. "I will send for her myself. It is past time."

Geneviive closed her eyes, rolling her lip between her teeth. It would not do to be seen crying when she had not wept a tear at the funeral. Instead, she held out her gloved hand and felt through the leather and fur as Jared clasped it in his. "A sister, Jared. Our sister."

He squeezed her hand.



The depths of summer had at last come to Hinichitii, and the stands of wildflowers that carpeted the lower hills of the Teeth streaked unexpected colors across the base of the mountain range: pale saffron and milky ivory, blue-violet. Jared reflected that there may even be butterflies as he scanned the brown grass on the edges of the tarmac. As children, he and Geneviive both had been entranced by those few that had braved the cold peaks of the keep, living flowers that danced on cold winds rife with pollen.

His sister pranced back from the control flat, still holding the bouquet of Heaven's Breath and Bottlebrush she'd picked for this day. Her brown face glowed stronger than the weak sun's, her dark blue eyes sparkling.

"They say the shuttle just asked for clearance. It's on its way down now. No more than another twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes," Jared mused. It had been warm enough to wear his summer's best, including the loam-brown velvet doublet he so infrequently had the opportunity to wear. "What will she be like, do you think, sister mine?"

"Oh, I hope she would be like us. She is kin," Geneviive answered, tugging her cobalt blue cloak over her shoulder as she scrutinized the sky.

"But kin that has not met us...or very nearly hasn't. Kin that hasn't stepped foot on Hinichitii since she was a babe too young for memories. Kin that might not even have been raised Hinichi...."

"Oh, Jared! To say such things! Some things are in the blood, surely as God is in every stone," Geneviive answered, ears flipping back in dismay.

Jared chuckled softly and touched his sister's cheek. Her veil had been draped across her throat today, as was proper for a lady in the company of brethren. "Ah, decherna. Do you know how much I love you?"

The Hinichi woman turned her face far enough to kiss his unfurred palm and smiled, leaning into his hand. "Only as much as I love you, chuniisu."

He pulled her close enough to embrace her, but not so tightly to crush the flowers, the purr in his throat a contented rumble.

"Look, oh!" Geneviive pointed at the silver wink in a crisp powder blue sky. "That must be her. Oh, I so hope she will like it here. Jared, tell me it will be so. My heart will break if Noelle does not love us. I know I shall love her on sight."

"Ssssh, ssh," Jared said, kissing the top of her head and releasing her. "The tolly can't be saddled before it's bought. We can only be our best for her, and hope she does not find us wanting."

Their hands slipped together, hers still gloved against the thin chill, his naked, and brother and sister watched the shuttle descend toward the only landing strip within three hundred lope-hours. Geneviive had never seen anything like the sleek Alliance shuttle; by the time she'd been old enough to leave the keep, the small Alliance embassy nexus at the base of the Teeth had been dismantled. But Jared recalled the seemings of things outside their world from his brief visit to that nexus, the friendly concern of the human doctor who had helped him so long ago, who had, all unknowing, had a hand in the shape of events today.

The predator-shaped shuttle slid to the ground, the reflection of the weak sunlight becoming a brilliant shield against its stylized wings. The wind's whispers carried further than the hushed thrum of its engines as it powered down. A door gaped open in its flank, and several men hopped to the ground, watching the ramp extend. As they off-loaded luggage and crates, another portal irised apart in the shuttle's shoulder. A leggy man in leathers against the cold swung down without waiting for the stairs to fully engage. He turned to offer his hands back into the shuttle. The sudden pain of his new signet ring catching his partially-furred finger forced Jared to realize how hard he and Geneviive squeezed against their anxiety.

The pilot backed away, lending a gentlemanly grip to the figure that appeared at the top of the stairs.

A female figure.

Her face swept across the tarmac and snagged on them. She handed something to the pilot, stepped off the shuttle, and walked directly toward them.

"My God," Geneviive whispered.

She was tall as a needle-tower, her lithe grace evident even through the relatively heavy tunic and breeches. The wind teased the edges of her unlined cloak around her boots. Her oval face held a human's alien beauty,

but her coloring owed everything to the Hinichisene, for she was one of the rare wolves-of-all-seasons. Her face and hands and tail streamed like liquid paint from the crisp cool of ivory and white through spring's ocher and yellow-brown to summer's deep browns and finally to gray and black. Hoarfrost-pale, her eyes only slightly recalled the blue that had bred truly through Dahrengard's last six generations... and her hair curling around her throat contested with the snow of the highest peaks and won purer to do justice to the equally white, black-tipped ears. Mother Mary ears of the most acclaimed loveliness.

Such a picture of poise and ethereal grace was their lost sister that Geneviive did not realize until minutes later that she wore pants! and an expression of such coolness to rival ice. "My God," she said again, more in herself.

"She looks like a pagan goddess," Jared murmured.

Geneviive gasped, "Jared! God will strike you down for that tongue. How could you —"

"Look at her," Jared said, his voice low and his eyes focused on the approaching wolfine female. "Would you say her beauty is like unto a saint's? An angel's? It's too earthly for that. It's like magic. She's not of our world, Geneviive."

"She's beautiful," Geneviive said wistfully, for the frost in those pale eyes did not bode well, "And I love her, just on looking upon her, as I said I would."

The woman paused, some fifteen armslengths away.

Jared stepped forward, his hand disengaging from Geneviive's. "Hale and God touch your head."

The stranger hesitated before answering. Her molasses-smooth mezzoalto seemed to break off a piece of an ongoing song otherwise unreachable to normal ears. "You called me here."

"We did," Jared said. "I am Jared, the Lord of Dahrengard, and this is Geneviive, my Lady-sister." He drew Geneviive to his side.

She studied them both, half a head taller than Geneviive and only a ear's length shorter than Jared. "I'm Noelle."

"You are our sister, and rightful co-inheritor of Dahrengard Heights," Jared said.

Noelle's ears twitched. "Me?" she asked with cool disbelief.

"You," Jared agreed.

Geneviive stepped forward and offered the blooms. "Noelle...welcome home."

The woman took the flowers only because, Jared thought, she didn't know what else to do with her hands. "I've never even heard of Dahrengard Heights."

"Then we shall make up for lost time," Geneviive said, smiling up at the taller woman. "Father did not fool with the laws of inheritance, and for us that means that the three eldest of the lord's progeny rule the land as a triad unless or until other circumstances prevent."

"What circumstances?" Noelle asked, her voice hardening.

"Like marriage into another barony," Jared offered, "Or renunciation."

"Then I renounce your...title. I don't know Dahrengard. I don't even know this planet. And I certainly don't know you!"

Geneviive's ears sagged and she said, "Oh, Noelle...please...."

"And you have something worthwhile to go back to?" Jared taunted. He stepped forward and wrapped his arm around Noelle's wrist. "Do you have a home elsewhere? Family? Friends? What do you have to lose?"

Noelle bared her teeth in her ludicrously gentle human mouth. Her canines were barely pointed. "My time."

"Think of the potential benefits," Jared continued, staring down the slight distance between his eyes and his lost sister's paler ones. "You can go back to your empty hearth...or be a ruler of wolves here. Why make a hasty decision?"

The perfect white and black ears flipped backward, but Noelle's voice had lost some of its predatory chill. "There is wisdom in careful decision-making."

"So there is," Jared said, stepping back. Geneviive stared at him, conveying her amazement by the tilt of her ears and the cocking of one hand. He indicated something with the butt of his chin. Geneviive followed it and pursed her lips.

Noelle had not loosed the bouquet.

"Come with us," Jared said. "Come see what we might offer you."

Noelle glanced from one to the other before nodding once.



"You actually live in a castle?" Noelle asked.

Jared glanced at the wolf-of-all-seasons; she hadn't uttered a word on the ride up the Teeth, and Geneviive's wilted ears and twitching tail betrayed the strain of the silence. He waited for the gate guards to wave an arm in salute before replying, "Where else would a Hinichi live?"

Noelle's eyes darted to his face, narrowing, before she inevitably turned her face back up to the heights.

Broader, larger holdings could ostensibly be found on the northern continent. In his frequent outings with his father, Jared had beheld many, yet each and every one had lacked a brutal edge, a harsh quality of line and elevation that defined every needled tower and barbed gate of Jared and Geneviive's home. The six towers that sprang from the slant of the Furrowmount claimed the audacity of spears, their conical roofs blackened as if fire-hardened. The half of the fort holding built out of the mountain side sported variegated rock in black and white — winter and autumn's palette without the touch of spring or summer's warmth.

Watchmen patrolled the thick walls of the battlements, where the drape of a fine net of powdered snow stressed how altitude prevailed over the season.

Seasons, Jared thought, were fleeting. The mountain snow was a truer symbol of the resolve of Dahrengard.

The gates trundled open for the three, the path leading to the keep cleared of the powdery ice. Jared took Geneviive's hand and gestured for Noelle to walk alongside. She stared at every man and woman who bowed to them as they passed.

"Do they always do that?"

"It is only proper," ventured Geneviive. "We are Dahrengard-scain."

"Skyne?"

"Dahrengard-scain," the smaller woman corrected. "Leaders can never be parted from their lands. You cannot have 'scain' without 'Dahrengard'."

"So it means leaders?" Noelle asked, almost shying from a kitchen-maid who had paused to curtsy, buckets and all.

Jared said, "Or 'nobles'."

Noelle frowned, ears tilting and eyes narrowing. "Did you learn Universal for my sake? Or am I expected to learn your tongue?"

"Our tongue," Geneviive said.

"We don't have one," Jared finished. "At least, not an entire one. If the Hinichi ever had a full language, all the evidence of it we have left is a relatively sparse vocabulary."

"Pretense," Noelle muttered.

"Heritage," Jared countered, and lifted an arm as the wardens opened the great black doors of the keep, each emblazoned with the jagged mountain sigil of the heights. "After you, decher-nasen."

"What does that mean?" asked Noelle of Geneviive sotto voce.

"It means 'my sisters'." Noelle's ears tipped back.



Jared stopped one of the guards passing through the anteroom. "Have Mariescha, Elijah, and Josephiat meet us in the audience chamber, please, Canton." He waved the women through the small room. "There'll be time for the two-breath tour later."

Noelle stepped away from the tapestry she'd been examining with obvious reluctance, boots thudding dully on the stone floor. "Where are we going now?"

"To the audience chamber so we can have the fealty ceremony."

The wolf-of-all-seasons stopped abruptly, her Mother Mary ears sealed to her skull and her tail a lance. "I haven't signed up for this just yet, Jared. I haven't agreed!"

Geneviive worried at her sleeve, glancing from one of them to the other. The guards politely studied the wall-hangings. Jared, however, did not flit an ear-tuft.

"I know you didn't. But while you're here, I'll have you treated as you would be if you were staying. How else will you know what you're signing up for? It can be undone."

Geneviive bared her teeth at the near lie and stared at her brother with large eyes. He ignored her.



Delicate fingers the color of spring touched the flowers she'd tucked into the sash at her waist. Noelle's eyes traveled briefly over the tapestry of the birschot herders on the richly-colored lawns of a summer in the Throat. Her ears, tail, her shoulders all slowly bled their tension and she nodded. "You're good, Jared. If I had to have a brother, I suppose I could have had a stupider one."

Jared forestalled his sister's outraged protest with one hand on her shoulder. He smiled at Noelle and said, "I've been called shrewd. It might breed true in the family. Please, follow us."

The strange wolf-of-all-seasons could barely keep her eyes to herself as Jared led her through the narrow greeting hall and into the courtyard, where the frosted blue of the sky's bowl offered a ceiling higher than the ones even in the needle-towers. The bubble of the tumbled rock fountain sounded crisply in the clear air. The shallow pool was rimmed in gray granite, its eastern edge interrupted by a mound of rough mountain stones. Noelle crouched beside its western edge, leaning over to touch the water and hissing softly.

"It's cold!" she exclaimed.

Geneviive smiled and said, "The courtyard fountain is cooled in summer before it reaches the pipes."

"Cooled?" Noelle asked, rocking slightly on the pads of her feet. Her chin lifted as she searched the mountain back of the holding. "You have hot springs?"

Jared lifted a brow ridge. "Good guess," he said. "Taste it."

Noelle dipped her head, sniffing her fingertips with her humanoid nose. Jared rolled his bottom lip between his teeth as her tongue flicked out against her nails. For a brief instant, her face slackened into a gentle curiosity, strands of white hair sifting the small breeze that circled inside the square courtyard. She had tasted without hesitating.

"No minerals," Noelle announced, then glanced up at brother and sister. Her thin black brows with their comma-shaped marks lifted. "It's filtered? You're hiding technology."

"We live in castles, but we're not savages," Jared said gently.

Noelle studied them with her hoarfrost eyes, her face again unguarded.

Geneviive said, "The courtyard fountain is just symbolic. There are filtered springs in the kitchens and the cleaners. Our hot springs are coveted

throughout the northern continent."

"I see," Noelle said, her face gradually closing. She stood, wiping her hand on her thigh. "I'm ready."

Jared captured Geneviive's hand and led them further west, to the Life's Path doors. Set into the face of the mountain, they marked the entrance to the impregnable inner holding where the Dahrengard-scain and their staff and closest relatives made their dens. One door had been carved of white stone, the other of black. Along the rims of the doors, two designs had been repeated as edge decorations: on the white side, a set of branching lines within a circle, and on the black side, a simple horizontal bar bisecting a circle. Jared paused before signaling the door wardens. Noelle reached out to trace the reliefs with her fingertips, the nails releasing tiny puffs of ice crystals, and the Hinichi man smiled even as he noticed her propensity for touching everything.

"The Life's Path doors," said Jared, anticipating her. "The growing branches of life, the sleep of death. A reminder that before we are given the light and leisure of Heaven, we have responsibilities on this world we are not allowed to throw off."

"Nice," was Noelle's sole, wry comment, but her fingers lingered on the reliefs until the wardens rolled the great rectangular doors into their pockets.

When their ancestor Dafid Dahrengard had carved the Heights out of Furrowmount's breast, he had not been searching for a comfortable abode. With holders to retain and rivals to contest, a fort suited him better than a palace. The interior doors leading into the deepest recesses of Dahrengard opened into the audience chamber, for Baron the First had no time to spare. He had intended to impress his visitors immediately and keep them impressed, malleable to his suggestions. No addition his successors contrived could stave off the stark majesty of the chamber beyond the Life's Path doors.

Thin windows added by Masard, Baron the Fourth of Dahrengard, let in a watery light from the rafters of the westward facing wall; glass being too much a concession to weakness, he had settled for sanding the walls as close to translucence as possible without physically excising the rock. The resulting illumination was both eerie and uncertain when contrasted with the butter-yellow light cast by a chandelier that hung so low it only

accentuated the height of the room. The stone chair on the roughly-hewn dais at the end of the chamber cast an irregular set of layered shadows into the chamber's recesses.

Jared watched Noelle carefully as he led Geneviive inside. Though the wolf-of-all-seasons did not slow, a twitch at the corner of her eye betrayed her unease.

Mariescha, Elijah, and Josephiatt waited as requested near the center of the long hall, their shadows flickering around them in translucent pools. Jared tacitly reassured them with a smile as he drew near, then canted his ears forward smartly and summoned his official voice, several notes deeper than his usual low tenor.

"Gentlewoman, Goodmen, I bring you greetings."

Their response echoed softly in a major third. "My lord, my lady."

"This is not something often done," Jared said, "But today I would ask you to stand for a fealty ceremony again." He saw the question in their eyes and held out an open hand, indicating Noelle. "Geneviive and I have brought home to Dahrengard our long lost sibling, Noelle."

Of the three, only Elijah betrayed no sign of surprise. The outlands master had been privy to young Jared's plan to defy his father; but none of them asked. They were sathet — they knew what pruschani did to infants like Noelle.

"Noelle, these are the heads of the commonfolk of Dahrengard. Gentlewoman Mariescha is the mistress of the personal and grounds staff. Goodman Elijah is the outlands master, who cares not only for the beasts but speaks for those living far outside our walls. Goodman Josephiatt is the inland master, and speaks for those within our walls and within the immediate perimeter of the keep." Jared smiled again and said, "If you would prepare yourselves for the ceremony, please."

Geneviive walked behind them to the traditional position of witness as the three slowly descended to one knee and tilted their heads back. Noelle stared at them.

"Now what do I do?" she asked to Jared in a low voice.

"Clasp their throats with your hand," he answered. "Tell them you accept their rightful subordination."

Noelle's ears sagged. "You're jesting."

"I'm not. Haven't you ever seen our wild brothers? This is a modification of what they do for the Alpha pair. We thought," and here Jared paused to smirk, "that it was more dignified than forcing them to roll over and offer their bare midriffs."

Her cheeks proved easy to read without the soft pelt of most Hinichi. Noelle blushed as she walked to Mariescha. Heavy bones had given the woman an appearance of solidity without the reality of extra fat. Her graying hair had been tied back in a perfunctory braid, wisps escaping to frame a summer-colored face. Yellow eyes stared politely up at the chandelier. Hesitantly, Noelle placed the flat of her hand across Mariescha's throat. She let her fingers down one by one until they snugly clasped most of the woman's neck.

Clearing her throat, Noelle said, "I accept your... rightful... subordination. Gentlewoman."

"Amen," they murmured, and the wolf-of-all-seasons started. She snatched her palm away.

Geneviive said softly, "It's only a ceremony, Noelle. You do well thus far."

Elijah's hands engulfed his knee entirely where they rested on his leg. Standing, the outland master would have loomed over Noelle, as if God had left him his tall, gangling frame as a relic of adolescence, forgetting to smooth it into the polish of an adult. Only the worn lines around his mouth and solemn brown eyes and the heavy cords on the backs of his hands and his exposed neck spoke of age. Noelle lightly touched one of those sinews before covering it with her palm and folding her fingers down.

"I accept your rightful subordination, Goodman," she said quickly.

"Amen."

Noelle backed away, reminding Jared suddenly of a skittish tolly. He nodded once to her solemnly, and she approached Josephiast. The inland master had been built like a short battering ram: broad shoulders, bulging arms each the size of two of Geneviive's legs. His blackened fingertips in concert with his build told eloquent tales of his black-smithing. He wore a God-braid down the right side of his face, where an old fight had claimed half of his ear.

"I accept your rightful subordination, Goodman," Noelle said as she covered his throat with her palm.

"Amen."

"Rise, all," Jared said. "And acknowledge your newest liegelady."

"Lady," the three murmured, bowing to Noelle. Their voices layered over one another, pale echoes in the massive hall. "Welcome. Welcome-welcome. Welcome, Lady. Lady. Welcome Lady."

"Thank you," Noelle answered, tossing her head.

"You may return to the duties I interrupted so rudely," Jared said with a grin, winning back expressions in a similar vein. The three heads of household filtered into the corridors leading out of the audience chamber, leaving only Jared, Geneviive, and a wolf-of-all-seasons who fidgeted as much as her candlelit shadows.

"Would you like to see your rooms?" Geneviive asked. "There's time before Jared takes you out."

"Out?" Noelle glanced at him.

Jared folded his arms behind his back. "As second eldest, your duty within the triad is to speak for the people Dahrengard rules."

"I thought Goodman...Elijah? Did that."

Jared and Geneviive exchanged a look. Geneviive said, "Our father did not hold the same priorities we do. In the traditional way, one of the triad saw to the people who claimed Dahrengard as liege. He split those duties between Elijah and Josephiat instead. We would prefer to allow the goodmen to return to their original postings."

"Which were?"

"Master of stables and Master of services."

Noelle looked from one to the other and said, "I see. So you are taking me to visit one of these...."

"Villages, yes," Jared said. "How long will it take?"

"Maybe three hours. We'll be heading for the Throat. It's beautiful in summer."

Noelle's particolored tail lashed once. "I'd rather just go, then."

Jared smiled. "Then go we shall."



While Noelle's awkward seat betrayed her inexperience at riding tollies, she'd listened gravely to instructions on guiding them and then followed

them rigorously on the trail. She adjusted rapidly enough to their rolling walk. The intermittent breeze tousled her soft white hair and stung color to her cheeks. She'd insisted on riding astride, like a man.

"So where exactly are we going?"

"To the Throat," Jared answered, rubbing the reins absently in his right hand as the trail unfolded. "It's the most prosperous area that tithes to Dahrengard."

Butterflies chased one another across the sturdy azure blossoms of the wild goodlips and terrapretties. Noelle's eyes tracked them. "Isn't it a little cold for butterflies?"

"It doesn't get much warmer than this here. They always manage to fly up far enough to see us. There'll be more of them in the Throat."

Noelle rolled her lip between her teeth, a mannerism that took Jared aback in its similarity to one of Geneviive's. He could sense her discomfort building, but ignored it to let her frame her questions. The path to the Throat from Dahrengard proper was one of the more beauteous ones, where the teeth of the mountain range lost their points, and then their girths, and then at last subsided into the gumless vista of an old man's mouth. Soft milk and cream flowers spread through the hoarfrost, breaking it into glassy slivers.

"Jared..."

His body tightened and he forced his ears to remain normal, canted forward. Such a soft voice, almost strangled by the emotions she'd been hiding so effectively from them. "Yes?"

Her pause drew on too long. Jared knew when the question came that it would not be the one he'd been hoping for.

"Three hours. What's on the agenda afterwards?"

"Supper, and maybe a small dance and celebration."

Noelle's black-rimmed ears twisted, one flopping down and the other trying to turn completely off her head. Her obvious confusion would have been almost comic had it not been the marker of a greater tragedy. "A celebration?"

"Of course." Jared did not offer any more. She would have to come to the conclusion on her own.

"So tell me more about the... Throat. Is that the place in the tapestry?"

Jared glanced at her. "Yes, actually. The one in the entrance hall."

"With the herders," Noelle said carefully, meeting his gaze and then quickly looking away.

"Yes. The birschot herders. Good springy hair comes off the birschot. We make it into thread and dye it in the winter games."

Noelle wrinkled her delicate human nose, its underside just stiff enough to recall the thick nose-pad of a normal Hinichi. "Thread-dying is considered a game?"

Jared chuckled. "It's a festive time. We celebrate the colors of the seasons."

"Pardon?"

"The colors of the seasons," Jared said again, surprised. "You don't even know that, do you?"

"Maybe you hadn't noticed, but I didn't really grow up properly."

The bitterness in her voice almost stopped his reply before Jared realized how important it was to keep from acknowledging it. "Hinichi come in definite color schemes, you would say. Winter colors are white and ivory and all those pale colors. Autumn is black and gray. Summer runs to the deep browns and reds, while spring claims the yellowish browns and the oranges and the brighter, warmer hues." He touched his own black cheek ruff. "You would call me an autumn-son, with winter rising since I'm mostly black with these few patches of white on my face and my chest, while Geneviive is entirely summer's daughter in her shades and shadows of brown."

"What am I, then?" Noelle asked dryly. "A freak?"

Jared reined the tolly in as his unease caused it to side-step. Too close to the truth, if not the right reasons. "Hinichi like you are rare and your coloration is prized. You are called a wolf-of-all-seasons, and they say that there is more of the Hinichisene in you than in the rest of us. Born at all times at once."

"What is the Hinichisene?"

Jared sighed and then grinned. "Ask me where God is, and I might have a readier answer. It's...what it means to be one of us. The heart of things and people Hinichi. The fount from which our identity and heritage springs. Our history helped to make it, but it's more than that. It's something God puts in all of us."

"How mystical."

Jared frowned slightly. His sister rode with slumped shoulders, her eyes focused on a point just between the tolly's oreate ears. "The Hinichisene is in you, Noelle. Stronger in you than in summer's daughter, or winter-rising autumn's son. You're one of the few wolves-of-all-sea-sons. Mark it well."

"I will," she murmured. "I only wonder who didn't."



"How did it go?" Geneviive whispered as Jared unpacked the wool sent by the village.

Jared's ears flipped back against his skull. "She can be difficult," he replied softly. "You never know when she's uncurling or if it's just your imaginings. And yet to see her... she has to touch everything, as if to make sure it's real." He shook his head. "Maybe you can do better with her than I have."

"Let me see," the smaller woman said, and then stepped away. "Noelle, come with me? I can take you to a nice bath before supper."

"I suppose it wouldn't be proper to be seen changing in mixed company," Noelle said, tail wafting to and fro.

Geneviive refused to blush. "Well, no," she replied.

Noelle chuckled. "Okay, then, 'sister'. I'm all for a bath."

"I know how it is. The rides are grueling. You think that because they're in the cold, you won't sweat, but somehow you do anyway." Geneviive smiled warmly at the taller woman and said, "It's just this way." She slipped into a side corridor leading away from the audience chamber deeper and higher into the side of the mountain. Taking the fork on the right, she led her newfound sister into the small suite reserved for Dahrengard-scain.

"Nice living room," Noelle murmured, staring at the oval-shaped nest with its rounded walls and the translucent rock windows. The hearth slept, lit only in the evenings in the summer. Thick rugs thrown on the stone floor alleviated the cold, and tapestries on the walls took the place of true windows save on the back wall where a massive viewscreen, flat and thin as any modern model displayed an image from the courtyard. "What's this?"



Geneviive grinned, ears pricking up and tail almost curling. "It's real-time," she said. "Grandfather wanted all the latest gadgets, but Father wasn't really...interested. He scuttled most of them. Jared and I want to bring them back, and then some. We're hoping to get u-bank connections as soon as we finish winter-stocking."

"A connection," Noelle whispered. "With the Alliance? What kind?"

"The whole thing. Real-time u-bank access, automatic updates, string-links to all the other services on the Core worlds, registration as a thread, genie data stream access and Well-pushed comm-links."

The wolf-of-all-seasons stared at her as if she'd grown wings. Geneviive actually felt her shoulders when the stare wound on too long. "Noelle? Did I say something wrong?" She pursed her lips. She'd studied the portfolio as avidly as Jared had when the courier had dropped it off.

"I... no. It would be a wonderful thing for Dahrengard."

Geneviive nodded. "We think so. But there'll be time enough for that kind of thing later. Won't you come bathe? We haven't assigned a maidservant to you yet, but I'll be glad to assist you."

"A maidservant?" Noelle's mezzoalto faltered up the scale into a squeak. "I don't need help to bathe."

"It's different from what you're accustomed to," Geneviive said. "We don't have automated showers. Someone has to wash your back and hair." She touched her own pale blonde braid.

"I suppose...."

"Trust me," Geneviive said, smiling, and led the way up the small stairs set into the side of the chamber. She pushed the pocket door back, releasing a faint cloud of steam. "Be careful on these steps, they're slippery."

The steam hung heavier as she ascended, her ears reporting Noelle's footsteps behind her. The top of the stairs opened onto the smooth platform of an open chamber, the rounded ceiling and its entire outward facing wall smoothed to milky translucence. The weak sun smudged a brighter dot against the very top of the chamber.

Noelle gasped, then cleared her throat and said, "I thought you told me it wasn't polite to change in mixed company...and now you want me to bathe in a gazebo?"

Geneviive laughed. "Oh, this is one of the top rooms in the keep... and even if you're in one of the needle-towers, you can't see through the stone

on a clear day."

"I suppose it's like a privacy screen," Noelle said to herself, and chuckled. "Natural glass-frosting. It's nice."

A shallow, smooth oval had been cut into the flat floor, clear water bubbling in it and releasing the clouds of steam that had been beading on Geneviive's fur up the stairs. She shed her long skirts, bodice and over-tunic, leaving only her expensive floor-length cotton shift.

Noelle crouched beside the pool. "Do you pipe this all the way up from the hot springs? Ow! It's hot!"

Geneviive folded her arms under her breasts and waited.

The wolf-of-all-seasons laughed. "Okay. That was dumb."

Geneviive wondered if the blush was on account of the heat, or if Noelle was actually embarrassed. She was slow to peel off her boots. Her tunic and pants took even longer. Geneviive had almost decided to offer her aid when Noelle finally pulled off the last layer.

"Oh!"

Noelle froze, her shoulders curling inward.

Geneviive stepped closer, one hand outstretched. "Oh!" she said again, her throat round with wonder. "Noelle...Noelle, you're beautiful."

"W...what?"

She realized then that the hunched shoulders and folded ears were shame, not surprise. More firmly, she repeated, "You're beautiful. I didn't think...no fur! Almost anywhere. Smooth, like a human, but all the colors of the seasons, and...and a pattern to them...."

Noelle stared at her, lower lip dragging down from upper. "I didn't think you were cruel."

Remembering Jared, Geneviive reached out and grabbed Noelle's shoulders, gazing directly into her eyes. "I am not lying, by God's word, I'm not!"

"You think I'm beautiful?" Noelle whispered.

"Yes!"

"Not... not abnormal? Not a mutant?"

Geneviive's stomach twisted at the pain, the longing, the hunger and hopelessness in the twist of dark brows and hoarfrost eyes. "No!"

Noelle searched her face, and then shook Geneviive loose. She unfolded herself from her seat and stood... and pirouetted slowly, arms outstretched and tail lifted. She reminded Geneviive absurdly of a flower. A dark ridge of black ran down her spine to spill open at her tail, and from this ridge other colors pulsed and flowed, running over one another to wrap around her body like fragile petals. She remembered, briefly, her mother telling her how fine painters layered pale, translucent films of color one over the other to create a rich, textured tapestry complete with all the implied fragility of its building. Painted flower. Living flower.

Steam rose in arabesques around the wolf-of-all-seasons as she deliberately descended into the water, dispelling the sanctity of the moment.

Geneviive took a deep breath. She hunted for soap crystals and a stiff brush. "I wish I had your ears," she said wistfully.

"My ears?" Noelle asked, mystified. She stiffened when Geneviive reached over and poured water down her white mane, but her shoulders relaxed as the brush began to work through its knots.

"Oh yes. Great-grandmother had Mother Mary ears, but she didn't see fit to bequeath them to me!"

The tension yoking Noelle's shoulder blades together bled slowly away. The wolf-of-all-seasons chuckled. "Should I even ask."

"The opaque white-furred insides, the pale backs and the black rims... they're like the ears of the clan runt, Rebeka, that Mother Mary praised for her loveliness. That's why we call them so. You'll have no end of suitors if you stay here, with such beguiling ears."

Noelle rolled one of the soap crystals between her fingers until it broke, studying the resulting powdery granules. "Somehow I've never thought of people's ears being 'beguiling'," she said, bemused.

Geneviive laughed, running the brush through the long white hair. "Well, you'll learn."

"Geneviive, what are the braids? Do they mean something?"

"The braids?" Geneviive paused. "You mean the ones tied with beads? Here, take some more of those crystals. A little more rubbing'll yield a nice lather. You're talking about the braids like Goodman Josephiat's."

Noelle nodded, pulling a knot into the brush with the movement. "I've seen other people wearing them. Especially in the village. Is it just a fad?"

Pleased and surprised at her sister's facile eyes, Geneviive fumbled with the knot, picking it out with her fingers. She slipped her feet into the hot water on either side of Noelle's ribcage. "Those are Godbraids. The lowlanders call them 'prayer-plaits'. You braid them when you want to remind yourself and God of one of your prayers to Him. If it's a petition, you braid them with faceted crystals. If it's to show gratitude, then you bead them with cabochons. And if you're just remembering someone in your prayers, you use metal beads, and sometimes little decorations that remind you of that person."

Noelle paused, one soap-sudded hand rubbing her forearm. "So what if you're thanking God for a petition he granted for your best friend?"

Geneviive laughed. "Gratitude always takes precedence over petitions, and petitions over people when you're deciding how to decorate them. And you always take out a separate braid for each prayer."

"You're not wearing one for your father."

Geneviive's hand fumbled, dropping the brush into the water. She reached down to fish it off the current. "Well. Father isn't exactly the kind to look down out of Heaven and notice."

"You didn't like him much, did you?"

"Children owe their parents obedience. The Good Book never said anything about love." Geneviive walked to the bench on the side of the chamber. "We'll have to put your clothes to the wash. I'll go get something for you to borrow in the mean-time."

Noelle twisted in the waters, her hands clawing the edges of the pool. "No skirts, please! Or dresses. They're so..." She stopped at Geneviive's lifted brow. "I'm not used to them," she finished, ears sagging.

"It's not proper for woman to be seen in men's clothing."

"I'm not a proper Hinichi," Noelle said. "Geneviive...even if I stay, I might never be a proper Hinichi...."

"If?" Geneviive asked softly, then waved a hand. "Never mind, Noelle-sister. I'll get you some men's clothing... for now. We can discuss setting an example for the young ones later." She slipped into the stairwell before the wolf-of-all-seasons could reply, her lips pressed together in a hard line and the shape of her eyes reflecting her worry.



The scent of pricklelemon and fosfur seeds wafted from the kitchen into the dining hall. Preparations for supper neared completion, and the chaos in the hall might well have been choreographed, so flawlessly did the several score servants dance among the tables, setting places, hauling trays, flashes of colors earth-dark and summer-pale. Geneviive stood beside her brother, fussing with the thick wool of her purple skirts, her ears pinned to her head in her agitation.

"I just don't know, Jared. She's so hard to read. I think she's so near to us, though, so near. Just a little longer and we might get to her."

"I know it's evil to speak of the dead, but —"

"Jared..!"

"— But Father might as well have killed her, decherna! You know it's so. We might just be in time to save her."

"Jared!" Geneviive's eyes shone with startled tears. "How could you say such things?"

"What's an ugly truth spoken of the deceased when weighed against this reality?" Jared demanded in a low voice, ears sinking. "We should have all defied him. Mother, you, I, the aunts and mid-wives who knew and didn't tell their husbands and children. Customs sometimes hurt people, Geneviive. Sometimes they kill people."

Geneviive covered her face. "Oh, Jared. I wish... I wish it had been different."

"Wishes and prayers, decherna," the Hinichi man said, sighing. "But at least, now, we have a chance. Where is she? They're already seating the old ones."

Geneviive scanned the crowd, separating the servants leading the thin-blooded Dahrengard elders to their seats, then stood on tip-toe. "There... by the entrance, looking bewildered. I'll fetch her. Noelle!" Waving, she pushed through the elaborate dance, cutting ragged holes in the rhythm. The wolf-of-all-seasons hugged herself in the shadow of the entrance, dressed in dark blue tunic and breeches of Hinichi cut. Her damp hair curled around her face where it didn't stick to her back.

As Geneviive approached, Noelle asked, "Is dinner always this big a commotion?"

"This is a commotion?" Geneviive asked, gently teasing. When the taller woman didn't smile, she said, "Yes, we always eat this way. The entire keep

comes together, as God intends, to break our bread. Come sit with us."

Noelle followed, unresisting, allowing Geneviive to place her between herself and Jared. She sat with the others when the bells sounded, running her palms over the hard stone table.

Geneviive and Jared both tasted their supper with new palates, imagining they had never eaten in Dahrengard and glancing occasionally at their guest. The cooks had outdone themselves with the fowl, dressing and stuffing it with the fosfur's seeds and the fibrous, webby net of the Saint's Foot herb, *a* tangy delicacy. The wine had a decidedly sweet and dry flavor, just a touch of wood — imported from the lowlands in the shadows of the Teeth, where soil was less recalcitrant. By the time the aftersoups in their bread trenchers had been cleared from the table, Geneviive felt her confidence renewed. Noelle had eaten heartily, her reticence to rip at the food with her hands swiftly dissipating under the pressure of her tactile curiosity. She nursed the wine after the food vanished, fingers splayed delicately across the lip of the heavy pewter goblet.

Goodman Elijah walked to the threshold before the table of the Dahrengard-scain and bowed, awaiting permission to speak. Jared glanced at Geneviive, who shrugged ever-so-slightly. He smiled, hiding his bewilderment.

"Goodman, pray you, tell us what brings you to our table?"

Elijah stretched his lanky frame upwards. "Master, me n' mine want to be toasting the new 'un." He lifted his goblet in a bony hand, his action mimicked behind him by the servants standing respectfully at their tables. Elijah trained his eyes directly on Noelle and said, "We're bein' glad to be havin' you back, m'lady. We'd be pleased, if you 'ould stay. You were missed."

Noelle's hands tightened on her cup. "Was I?" she managed, her voice a rasp.

"As it please the Lord, you were," Elijah confirmed. He lifted his cup and said, "T' the young mistress."

"God's blessings." The benison rode up to the table like the summer wind.

Noelle stood, listing to one side, her face crumpled. She twisted around and took one dignified step, then stumbled and darted from the hall.

Jared and Geneviive sprang to their feet and ran after, up corridors lit by sconces back to their rooms.

Noelle huddled by the fire on her hands and knees, head bowed and hair spilling, white milk, against the flagstones of the hearth. Her shoulders leaped and shook, though she made no sound. Geneviive hastened to her side and dropped to her knees as Jared closed the portal.

"Noelle! Oh, Noelle, you're not...."

The wolf-of-all-seasons lifted her face. Fire-emblazoned liquid trailed down her cheeks. Dark spots on the stone near her hands testified to the length of her tears.

"Noelle, decherna," Jared said, his voice low.

"Stop it!" she cried. "Stop calling me that! How can you call me that! I don't understand!"

"Don't understand what?" Geneviive asked, trying to reach out and touch one of the jerking shoulders.

Noelle tossed her head, hair whipping around her chest. "You call me 'sister!' You say I'm ruler over your wolves! You say I belong here, that I'm beautiful, that I'm special and God-touched and even your servants toast me! Well, if I'm so God-cursed special, why did you abandon me in the first place?"

Sparks popped into the ensuing silence.

Jared walked forward and crouched in front of Noelle. Her breasts heaved as she swallowed past her sobs, dark brows pulled inward, the blood-shot whites of her eyes darker than her hoarfrost blue irises. "I will unriddle you that, Noelle. But you must trust my answer, and that Geneviive and I are not here to harm you."

Geneviive gently unsealed Noelle's hands from the hearth, receiving only one wild look of agonized uncertainty. Shaking, Noelle bowed her head, then looked up at Jared from beneath a trembling, ragged fall of white hair.

"You know by now that our father did not always see our ways," Jared said, waiting until the wolf-of-all-seasons nodded. "He was a follower of what we call the pruscha. Grandfather, Mother, Dahrengard in general has always been of the sathet sect, but Father... no one could gainsay him. When he became Lord of the holding, the pruscha was the law, no matter what we thought."

"What does that have to do with me?" Noelle asked, still quivering, her face, her heart finally vulnerable.

"The pruscha is a stricter sect than the sathet," Jared said, staring at her, willing her to feel his sincerity. "They believe that pride is the worst of the seven deadly sins. They preach that there once lived a group of Hinichi called the Berena that wanted to be as great as the messiah. They began to breed among each other purposefully to reach a point where they were made in his image. Not as the messiah had made them — wolves with thoughts and the shapes of men — but as the messiah was."

He tipped up her chin in his finger, aware of Geneviive's brilliant eyes as an unfocused smudge immediately to his right. "Human, Noelle. They wanted to be human."

A new tear rolled down her cheek as Noelle's eyes thinned and she drew in a sudden breath.

Jared said, "The pruschani believe babes born too human in seeming are demons sent to tempt the Hinichi into doing as the Berena did. They leave those infants to die in the cold. That's what Father forced Mother to do to you."

The whine that whispered out of Noelle's throat had no match in Jared's memory. He had never heard such a sound. He prayed he never did again.

"Because...of my face?"

"And your skin," Geneviive murmured, saddened.

"How did I... I should be dead!"

"Jared went after you."

Noelle looked sharply at Jared, eyes widening. "You...?"

"With Elijah's help," Jared said, letting one knee down to the floor and propping his free hand on the other. "I was newly seven years old, and Geneviive hadn't even been born. I found out from one of the midwives' children what had happened. Elijah advised me, but I told no one else until your sister was born. I followed the servants out to the hill and waited until they'd gone, then took you down to the nexus of the Alliance embassy at the base of the Teeth. The doctor there promised me he would get you off-world, where you could have a chance to live."

"Then when Father died," Geneviive said, stroking Noelle's hand, "We sent for you right away. So you could come home."

"Why... why couldn't you...."

"Father was not often a reasonable man," Jared said, his voice as gentle as the finger under Noelle's chin. "If we had defied him, he would have killed



you himself. It was the only way we could think of to save you."

Noelle slumped against Geneviive. "It's so much. I need time."

"You have all the time in this world," Jared said softly. "Sleep, take the days at your pace. This is your home."

Noelle glanced up at him, then nodded swiftly and stared at her folded legs. The fire cast a halo across her glossy hair. She said nothing for several minutes, then repeated the word, as if it were new, as if it were curious and uncomfortable and wondrous.

"Home."



Noelle clasped each of them to her with all the strength in her lithe frame. Geneviive found herself surprised at the hunger in the embrace; returning it, she barely missed smashing her nose against a ladyshoop, the bloom faded but still faintly scented.

"I hate to think that I've disappointed you," the wolf-of-all-seasons was saying, the wind tousling the fur collar of her tunic. "I promise whatever I decide I'll come back myself and tell you. You've earned that much. It's just that..."

"You don't need to explain," Jared said, gripping her shoulder and squeezing affectionately. "You've been out there all your life. You need to think in the quietude of the places that are familiar."

"Just remember that we'll be here for you always, whatever you decide," said Geneviive fervently.

"I know," Noelle said, sounding surprised. She picked up her bag and said, "I'll send back word. Be well!"

Jared grinned. "We will. God touch your head!"

Noelle's smile grew shyly in return. She turned and trotted towards the sleek shuttle hunkered on the tarmac, her shadow stretching eastward across the dark pavement.

Geneviive leaned against Jared as he waved. She sighed softly against his velvet doublet, watching the figure recede. "Oh, Jared. She came with the summer and is leaving with it. I had so hoped she would stay."

"She'll be back," Jared said, so firmly that Geneviive pulled away to look at his face. He was still grinning, his arm defining an arc in the air.

"How do you know?"

Jared only smiled. Geneviive turned her gaze toward the figure on the tarmac that was pausing at the shuttle's stairs to wave. Summer's waning sunlight glowed in the metal beads that marked the two braids tangled in white, white hair.





# Red Dog and the Day of the Move

Dekker Graden

*The proof that man is the noblest of all creatures is that no other creature  
has ever denied it.*

— G. C. Lichtenberg

My father is *a* tyrant. Anyone with half a brain can tell that by the way he makes me wear that itchy old radiation suit even when the counter isn't above three. Usually it is all the way down in the safe, green area. Red can go out to play without his suit when it's down that low. My father makes me wear mine all the time. I hate it!

It takes forever to put the suit on. Buttons everywhere; each needing to be fastened, and not a one can be missed or the world will come to an end, according to Miss Fizkey. She's the nanny for my pre-kindergarten class. Red and I take her class together. He's really smart and helps me with my ants, bats, and cats. The first letter of each word is part of the alphabet and Red can say them all. Dad says it's because of the 'nanos' in his head, but I know better. Red is smarter than most of the kids.

Red needs my help to put his suit on though. Getting his suit on is even worse than trying to put on my own. He only has his four paws and no hands like I do. His auburn fur gets tangled with the folds of the hard-suit. He said that he has always been like that. Sometimes I feel sorry for Red — at least 'till he beats me at Tic-tac-toe.

We got to go to the food center with my dad today. We both had to wear our suits, and even my father put his on before we left. He is always saying that the winds might come from the east at any time — from the big bomb hole where the old city used to be. It has never come from the city as far back as I can remember. Red says that it's true though, so I guess that at least my father is right about the winds.

Going to the food center is always fun. There are so many people there to see... other kids, too. Some of them have better parents than I, as they don't have to wear their suits. They get roses to show off! I wish that I had a rose

to show off like they do, but Red said that they were burn sores and not roses. He is sometimes kind of old fashioned, even for a dog. He's probably right about them hurting though. I guess that I am glad I don't have one yet.

When we got to the food center my father got into the mail handout line first. He is hoping to hear from the dome people about a new home. I have never seen what is wrong with the one we have now, as it is a really cool place to live. There are only a few mutes on the block and they don't give anyone a problem. My friend Joe from Miss Fizkey's class told me that where he lives, there is a mute colony right next door!

I have to stay close to my father when we wait in line at the mail handout. The last time I tried to go exploring, my dad turned my number two black and blue. Waiting in line is really boring, so Red and I get to talking. We thought that it would be fun to do the counting game again. I start with what Red says are odd numbers: one, three, and five. He does the even ones: two, four, and six. My father likes to see me play this kind of game with Red, more than he does the really fun stuff. Maybe he will think I am doing something good and use some of the chits for candy when we get in the food line.

The lady behind the mail handout has the strangest suit, not like anything I have seen other people wear. Red says that hers is power armor and not just a hard-suit like father and I wear. It doesn't look any nicer to put on than mine, as there aren't even any buttons that I can see. She has a clear faceplate and you can see her smile when she hands out the mail.

Father opened his mail as we walked over to the food line. He had a letter today. I don't know who would write to him though.

There was something strange going on with my father. He was reading the mail and not paying attention to the other people in the food line. I talked with Red and we decided to stand guard for him, as a few of the mutes in the center were giving us the eye. No one has ever bothered me with Red by my side, as people are afraid of him. I have never seen many dogs here in the center, and Red is the only one that I have met that can talk.

My father gave me the chits for the food and told me to pick up what we needed, as he was busy reading his letter. He must have seen Red and I playing the counting game, so was letting me pick out the kind of candy I wanted. So the first thing that I asked for was a bag of rock candy. Red stopped me from getting more candy and said that I should only get

standard food packs for the rest. So I turned the chits over for the standard packs with one bag of candy.

The standard packs are supposed to be good for you, or so Red tells me when I ask. I have always found them to be so runny when you try to eat them. Red is good about that, as he will eat my share when I can't get it all down. Dad doesn't know that I share with him sometimes. The hard bits of candy are much better.

The hood of my suit just lays over the shoulders with only a couple of buttons, so I managed to slip a little bit of the candy under my suit as we walked home. Dad was telling me that we were going to move in the next couple of days to a new home. The dome people had a place for us to go to under the sea! I looked at Red and debated telling father I couldn't swim. I guess that it would be all right for father. Red, and I to go to the dome city together. There are probably other kids there to play with and Red could probably out-think all of them.

Carrying the standard food packs was getting very hard as I didn't think that they were that heavy when we started. I had four of them, Red had one under his suit's pack hood, and father was only carrying ten. I told Red about how heavy they were and he said not to worry about it, we were almost home as it was and not to bother father. It was starting to get a little windy as we walked so I shut up. You have to shout to be heard through the suit if anything is happening on the outside. Like the wind.

The wind didn't look like the normal ones. I asked Red what he thought about them and he just told me to walk faster. Red never talks to me like that — just never! The wind was blowing from the old city; even my father realized this and put his letters away. "Come along," he told me.

Something bad was happening — I could tell by the way Red and my father acted.

A wind from a storm, Red said. It only blows in from the old city when a big storm comes along. My rad counter was way up into the red, more than I have ever seen it before. It was lucky that I had my suit on! Father told us to drop all the standard packs except for the one on Red's back. They were all contaminated now except for the one and he didn't want to risk eating them. When I wasn't carrying the packs I could run with my father back to our home.

Father didn't use the front door like we have always been told to. I followed him back to the side room. It is a little room that is only tacked onto the side of the house. I remember father saying that it was a green house once. It looks more brown now than green to me. He had Red and I take off our suits in that little room and leave them behind. The suits were in the yellow on my rad counter now. I hated to think about having to wash them later.

We sat at the kitchen table and father told me about the dome. It is far away from us and under the sea. He told me that I don't have to know how to swim. The best part is that I wouldn't have to wear my suit and kids there don't have to always carry their rad counters with them. There aren't any rads there. That part was a little hard to comprehend... Rads have always been everywhere.

My father told me about how much stuff I could bring with me. The dome people would let you bring a ton of stuff with you — *a* whole fifteen pounds of things! I told him that I would get Red's stuff together too. He took my hand for a moment and looked like he was going to say something, then just sent us on our way. Red and I both went to my room and started to check things for how many rads they had.

Red says that I can't take anything that isn't in the low green. Most of the old toys by the wall were in the high green so I left them behind. Mr. Snoopy was all right though. He was missing one of his eyes but Red said my father could get another button for him.

My blanket and the picture of my mom also had to go with us. My mom died a long time ago, just after I was born. Red said that it was almost three years ago. He tells me that the picture is very important and that I should always treasure it over all else. Red was in the picture, only he was very small in the picture and had big oversized paws.

Packing up Red's stuff is a lot easier. I just put it in a sack. There was his favorite chew toy and claw clippers, and he also has four books, all by Dr. Seuss. He reads them to me all the time, saying that I will learn to read them too. I have been working on reading them, but I can't understand them like Red does.

Red hardly has anything that he wants to take with him and told me that he probably wouldn't need to pack anything at all. He is such a silly dog.



I spent most of the day packing up our stuff. Father came to tuck me in for the night, and said he didn't have the time to read me a story. It was all right though, as Red was there to read me one of his books. After father left I held the book up for Red and he told the story. It was one of the longer books that Red doesn't normally try to read. A poor rabbit like Mr. Snoopy had to leave his boy. It was a sad story and I held onto Mr. Snoopy. I would never want to lose him.

Father is looking down on me now in the morning light. I must have slept really well last night, as it was bright in my room. The wall is tinted red with light. He grins at me and it is such a wonderful sight. Father hardly ever smiles at anything. He asks me if I have everything I was going to take packed up. I tell him that I have both Red's and my stuff all ready to go. He reaches up and brushes the hair off my forehead, the rough fingers feeling strange. Then he tells me that Red can't come with us.

I couldn't believe what he said. "No!" I shouted at him. Red would always be with us. He was part of our family and would always be with us.

My father picks up my stuff and carries it out of my room. I followed him out, asking him why Red couldn't come. He just has to stay with us! "There are too many things we need to take with us to the domes." said father. "We wouldn't be able to take what we need if Red were to come along."

I left the living room running, but couldn't see very well. Why do I have to cry?

Red follows me back to my bedroom and lies down close to where I am sitting.

What can I say? I ask Red and he just nuzzles me.

"It is all right," he says to me. "You are going to a better place than here."

All I can do is hug him. I would never be able to leave him and I told him so. He just shook his head. He tells me that there are things in life one must do. I say to him that he is full of it. If I couldn't take him because there were too many things, then I wouldn't go.

Red was quiet for a long time as I hugged him. He gets like that when he is trying to think really hard. I have not cried into his fur in more months than I can count, as that is a sissy thing to do. I find myself doing so now though. I can't live without Red. "You are my only friend," I tell him.

He sets his chin on my shoulder and nuzzles my cheek. Slowly, he tells me what I must do and I listen closely to his words, tears drying in my eyes.



Moving around behind my father and getting my sack wasn't easy as he was in the living room most of the time. I managed to do it when his back was turned and take it to Red. He looks up at me. "How badly do you want me to come with you?" he asks.

I tell him that it is the only thing that I want in the world.

He nods to me in that way he does, his head bobbing to the side. "Then you can bring nothing else."

I have to leave Mr. Snoopy behind. Red said that it was all a matter of weight. If I took nothing but him then we just might be able to have him with us. After I had emptied my sack. Red said to keep it ready. When the time comes he would get into the sack and travel with us. He said that I have to make sure to be the only one to carry the sack so that my father never finds out how heavy it is. I tell him that I think that I could do it.

Inside it hurts so much to leave behind Mr. Snoopy and my blanket. I never thought that I would ever leave them. The picture of my mother I slipped into my pocket. It is the only picture of her and Red together — taken in her lab. Red is here with me so it doesn't hurt as much. I feel better after he talks to me.

"There is only an hour left till we leave," my father tells me from some other part of the house.

"We will never see this place again," says Red. I don't know what I will do without my swimming trunks. I have to leave them behind with all my other clothes. Red tells me not to worry. He will be there for me now.

When it is time to go, I hold open the cloth sack and Red manages to curl up inside. He is really heavy but I manage to pick him up just as my dad comes into the room.

"It's time to go," he says and I nod.

"I am ready to go now," I tell my father. My heart is beating in my chest, hoping that he doesn't see what I am doing.

He asks me if I have said goodbye to Red and I tell him that I have. I don't like lying to my father, but I don't have a choice. I must lie or lose Red.

We had to walk all the way across town to get to the bus that would take us to the sea's edge. It was a special government bus so we were told to take off our suits, as we wouldn't need them again. I kept my Rad Counter with me but the inside of the bus was in the low green for everything. I even

checked the dust under the seat, a trick that Miss Fizkey told Red and I about in class. It was still low green.

I held my bundle in my lap as we traveled even when my father asked if I wanted to put my stuff away. I told him no and he didn't bother me. He said that if it made me feel better then I could hold it. It was a long bus ride as we circled the ruins of about three cities on our way to the sea.

Father was telling me that we would get to ride in a sub when we got to the seaside station. The land we passed by was all the same. Boring... We did pass a couple of forests, the brown limbs crumbling down to the ground. They didn't look much like the trees in Red's books. I asked father about them and he said that they were dead. I guess that is why they are not green.

Night came and I slept as the bus rocked during our travels. I don't know how long I was asleep but when I woke, the bundle with Red in it was sitting by my side. Seaside station was only a few minutes away.

The bus rolled to a stop. As we made for the exit we were met by some men in power armor. Each of them joined different people that got off the bus. The power armor was different than what the mail lady wore. Hers had been a dark blue and this armor was spotted brown and black. Looking up at their faceplates I see that they are also clear, only they didn't smile like the mail lady would have. They asked my father for his paperwork, and my father gave the man the letter he had gotten yesterday.

The man in power armor wants us to follow him to a low building on a hill overlooking the sea. We are going to be processed. I hold onto Red in his sack and try to act like he isn't that heavy. I am scared that someone will see him move inside my sack, but we make it to the low building without anyone stopping us. It makes me feel good.

The inside of the building is lighted. The floor shiny bright and the walls lightly colored. There are men to one side by small platforms and we are led over to them. The man seemed to be very friendly. "I need you to put your luggage up here son. This platform will tell us if you have more than you can take."

I lifted the sack with Red in it and slid it onto the platform. There was a beep as a red light went off. The man by the platform looks right at me and says that he is sorry. "You're going to have to leave more behind, son. You're fifteen pounds overweight." He is looking at me and I can't say

anything. My mouth is dry and there is a ringing in my ears. I'm scared and I don't know what to do, so I try and think what Red would say.

Before I could, my Father reached over me and picked up the sack. He asks me what I have in it. I can only watch and hold my breath as he opens up the sack. Surprise is on my father's face as Red tumbles out, his auburn fur looking a mess matted to his body and sticking out in strange ways. All my father did was stare at Red.

My knees feel weak as Red and I make eye contact with each other. He comes over to me and nuzzles my cheek. "Be brave, I will talk with father." He turns around and walks away from me to my father. They talk quietly with one another and my father looks at me from time to time. I can't hear anything that they are saying, but the man by the platform has a strange look on his face.

Father reaches down to Red and strokes his head, then moves over to his own set of luggage. He carefully starts to unwrap everything within.

Red comes to me and nuzzles me and I wrap my arms around him and hug. Quietly Red whispers to me. "Father is leaving behind your mother's notes and his own camera to make space for me." I look at his face and then at my father again. I recognize the camera, as I was never to touch it. There was a pile of old worthless computer optics and paper next to that. Everything else he put back away in his luggage.

My father walks over to the platform and puts his luggage there. The man by the platform nods to him. "Do I add the dog's weight to your allotment?" My father nods to him.

"Are there more?" asks the man by the platform, nodding towards Red.

"No." says my father, "That dog is the only one." He waves his hand toward his camera and the computer optics. "You should have someone pick up the notes for safe keeping. It will be a long time before someone will be able to do it, but the tools for creating another are there."

We are shown past the platform to a doorway. Outside of it is a pathway down to a dock that juts out to the sea. My heart races and I almost shout with joy. Red will be coming with us.

At the end of the long path there was a dock, and next to it was a funny looking yellow sub. I hold my father's hand as we walk down the path. His cheeks are smeared with his own tears as we walk together. Whispering in

my ear Red told me that father had given up as much I had when I left Mr. Snoopy behind.

My father is looking out over the sea at the sunset as we make our way down to the dock. We are a family for the first time since I can remember. Maybe he isn't such a tyrant. I held his hand in mine and gazed at the sea with him. My other arm was over Red's back. The sunset was fantastic.



# Before I Kill You, Mr. Bond

**Michael J. McGee**

"Well, Doctor Shockwave, you've caught me. Took you long enough..."

ShadowFox, guardian of Alpha City, was telling the truth — he was well and truly caught. He was wrapped up in chains which negated his shadow powers, and were sapping his superhuman strength, speed, and agility; reducing him to nothing more than a five foot eleven anthropomorphic fox wearing a black coat over some light, flexible armor. He was dangling over a vat of corrosive green goo, and around him on all sides were various bits of high tech equipment, some of it no longer in good repair. Twenty feet away, on an antigravity platform, stood Doctor Shockwave — his lab coat stuffed with hidden devices and inventions, his skin the color of paper, and his hair stuck in a permanent frazzled jolt like the Bride of Frankenstein without the "bride" part.

"Yessssssss, Mister ShadowFox. It did take me long enough. You put up an incredible struggle..." the doctor looked around at some of his smashed equipment, and sneered. "I suppose my insurance will not cover this."

The hero struggled valiantly in his chains. "There is no insurance policy on evil, Doctor Shockwave."

"Beg pardon?"

ShadowFox stared blankly into space. "I... can't believe I just said that. Sorry. I don't usually spout off cheesy dialogue..."

"Nobody does anymore, did you notice that? All the superheroes lately, they talk in bizarre psychotic metaphors and with inane street language. Like professional wrestlers, really."

"You hate wrestling too? I thought I was alone..."

"You're not going to get me to let you go on the basis of that, ShadowFox. You have dogged me for years — YEARS! My plans were perfect until you wandered into the mixture, with your big black duster flapping in the breeze and your big orange furry-type head and your... shadow powers, are they?"

"Yes, my shadow powers. And as you've noticed, I look kind of like a fox on two legs, hence the name Shadow**FOX**. Now can we get on with this?"

"On with what?"

"Oh, come on, Doctor." ShadowFox smirked as he swayed back and forth gently. "Every time we get to this part, you feel the need to unburden your soul and tell me what you've got planned. What is it this time? Using tunneling robots to collapse buildings? Antigravity ray to levitate the city into space? Death laser on the moon? That last one's been done, in a movie no less..."

"Not this time, my fine furry friend. No. No, this time I have decided to forego the dramatics and dip you in this special alchemical mixture." Doctor Shockwave pointed towards the seething green goo that sat underneath ShadowFox's swinging form. "The chains you're currently bound in are enchanted with a rare type of metal that serves to negate magical and metaphysical abilities, such as your unnatural strength, speed, agility, and the ability to generate solid shadow. The mixture down below, is... well, far more potent than mere negation, I would say."

"So you're not telling me what you're up to this time?"

"Not as such." Doctor Shockwave grinned at his lifelong foe. "I doubt you'd want to hear anyways."

"No, I really do. Please... I always love to hear a megalomaniac on a roll. Brightens my day."

The doctor laughed darkly. He reached into his coat, and pulled out a small black box. "All I have to do is press this button, and poof! No more superhero. Then I can get to the proper business of, I don't know... taking over the Eastern Seaboard?"

"Oh, brother..." ShadowFox shook his head. "Why don't supervillains think big anymore? I mean, the Eastern Seaboard? What happened to owning the whole country, or the world, or the universe? Now it's just the coastline? I swear, no ambition."

"Laugh all you want, ShadowFox — it won't change the fact that I now have complete control over whether you live or die. Would you like to beg for your life? It might help..."

"Naw, not really." ShadowFox sighed. "Been a long day, you put up a tough fight before you blind sided me with the vertigo destabilizer... let's just get on with it."

"Are you sure? No begging?"

"Nope."

"Not even a teensy bit of begging?"

"Sorry."

Doctor Shockwave sighed. "Just beg, alright?"

"No."

"Please? Just beg."

"Beg? What am I, a dog? ...no, don't say it, I'm not in the mood for this. Dunk me, dissolve me, just quit boring me."

Doctor Shockwave's hand hovered over the button. "All right, I can accept a death with dignity... as long as it's a death."

"And that's another thing. Why this setup? A tub of green alchemical goo? What's up with that? Why not just shoot me instead?"

"I tried that already, remember?" Shockwave stared at the fox-man. "You know, you're not making this easier on me..."

"Oh, yeah, you did try that. You were on your 'grim kick'..."

"Shut up."

"And you wore a lot of leather and you talked like a biker..."

"Shut up."

"And, best of all... hehe... best of all, you wore sunglasses at 2 in the morning, and that one time you tried to attack me..."

"I said, shut UP..."

"And you ran smack into a damn wall! Oh, boy, I was in tears! Cops were too. That was classic."

"ShadowFox, you know I don't like to be reminded of that. It was a very tough time for me." He shook his head. "The 'grim and gritty' phase. Bloody hell. What a nightmare. I notice you haven't grown out of it..."

ShadowFox looked at the doctor as if he'd grown an extra appendage. "What do you expect, lycra spandex and a cape? I'm a FOX! That stuff's uncomfortable enough on its own, it doesn't need wadded up fur added into the mixture..."

Doctor Shockwave stared back at his opponent. "You mean... that isn't a suit?"

"I thought you knew."

"Why did you think that?"

"You haven't tried to unmask me yet."

*...I knew I forgot something...* "Er... well... well, entertain me. How did you get your powers?"

"Oh God, this is pathetic."

"No, tell me! I'll write it into my memoirs and make everyone read it when I control the Eastern Seaboard."

"For crying out loud... aren't you supposed to tell me about your origin now? Aren't you supposed to overwhelm me with the sad, tragic tale of your aversion to barbers?" ShadowFox sighed.

"There is NOTHING wrong with this haircut! ... oh, hell. You know my story already. Brilliant scientist, big ethics scandal. I invented the gene-splicing ray and turned the ethics committee into various things, and then you showed up and made me change them back... What's yours?"

"Ah, can't tell you. Secret identity thing."

"Just the short strokes."

"Not much to tell." ShadowFox gave the chains a customary wriggle, decided they were too firmly set, and resumed talking.

"Average guy, average life, possessed by an evil kitsune spirit, managed to drive it off with help from Phoenix Force, was gifted with super powers from the union... went through the 'I don't want to be a superhero' phase, then the 'reluctant hero' phase, then the 'bitter and twisted' phase... now I'm in the 'I like my job and I think I look cool with fur' phase. Oh, and I'm thinking of setting up an animal-themed super team — we'll be the Fur Fighters or something — don't really have a name yet. I'll try and get Prowl from Phoenix Force to join, maybe the Hopper too... Anyways... Going to dip me or not?"

"In due time, in due time..."

The fox smirked. "You can't, can you?"

"What? Are you insane? Of course I can! Here!" The doctor waved the box in the air, showcasing the bright red button. "I press this button, you fall down — boom, end of hero! End of agitation! I control the Eastern Seaboard, and yes, I know it's not the biggest goal in the world but at least it's realistic! I'm Doctor Shockwave and I have you completely in my control and I can do anything I want! **So there!**"

"So do it. Press the button and get it over with."

"I'll press it when I feel like it."



"Oh, you're absolutely pathetic. Look at you. You couldn't have a worse sense of personal fashion if you tried, you invent an antigravity platform and don't even patent it, and you don't even have the guts to bump me off because I'm the only guy who actually listens to you..."

"SHUT UP!" Doctor Shockwave pressed the button and ShadowFox dropped like a stone, the chains that bound him rattling all the way down until he fell inside the vat, then sank under the surface in less than a second.

The Doctor leaned over the platform and stared, stunned, at the vat as it bubbled. "Oh, my God... my God, it's true..."

He fell to his knees, dropping the control box. "It's true, I don't believe it, it's true... he was the only one who listened... the only one who cared... and now he's..."

His eyes flipped open. "Wait a minute. He can't be dead. It was just..."

He peered over the edge.

Creeping out from the green goo, there and not there, darkness in stark contrast to the light, were several tendrils of solid shadow. They grasped onto the rim, and were followed by their controller, the hero ShadowFox — the very smelly, very upset hero known as ShadowFox, dripping with semi-liquid chunks of white meat, stained with green food coloring. "Nyuuuuhhhh... gawd... chicken fat? You dipped me in a tank full of rancid liquefied chicken fat?"

"You're alive! I mean... of course you're alive..."

In less than a second, ShadowFox was on eye level with Doctor Shockwave. His body was surrounded by a type of dark aura, and from it he had formed shadowy tendrils that propped him up. He stared at his foe, ready for anything. Even taken by surprise, the Doctor was still a lethal foe. "Of course I'm alive! The impact loosened the chains... chicken fat!? Your great alchemical potion was chicken fat!?"

"It was all I could think of!" The Doctor sobbed, and ShadowFox just stared at him. "There is no plan, I've been blocked for months, and I'm so alone, I just wanted someone to talk to..."

"You... I don't believe this. You just wanted someone to talk to? Me? Why?"

"You're the only one who cares!" Doctor Shockwave, delusional sociopath and inventor of the beer hat, came completely unglued in front of

ShadowFox. "You're the only one who listens! You're the only one who takes me seriously..."

"Of course I take you seriously! Half the time you're threatening to vaporize half of Alpha City!"

The doctor's lip quivered. "Yes!" he exclaimed, tears welling forth. "Everyone else treats me like some kind of paranoid freak, but you don't, you beat me up all the time and stop what I'm trying to do but at least you listen to me when I talk and you make me feel important..."

"You're kidding. You have to be. Right now you're going to pull some kind of quantum flux bomb on me..."

"See, there you go! That's all I want, is for someone to listen... mom and dad, they never listened, dad wanted me to go into aluminum siding and I wanted to be a veterinarian, and why the hell COULDN'T I have a puppy. Mom, did you ever think to tell me that? Did you ever think that I deserved a reason, you selfish miserable — "

ShadowFox bit his lip, suppressing the urge to laugh. "Wow. I... never realized. Uhm... do you want a hug?"

"What?" He looked up. "Oh... yes, please."

"Mind if I disarm you first?" "No, go ahead."

ShadowFox reached inside Doctor Shockwave's coat and started tossing away the doctor's various personal armaments. Thanks to enhanced senses and a nose for dangerous materials, he was soon sure that the doctor was harmless. The Doctor threw himself, sobbing, into ShadowFox's arms. "I just wanted them to love me... why couldn't they accept who I was...?"

"Aw, there, there..." ShadowFox patted him on the back. "Let it all out. It's okay to cry. Share your pain..."

Several awkward minutes passed for ShadowFox, as his arch-enemy cried on his shoulder whilst chicken fat dripped off his fur. But shortly enough, the doctor was all cried out, and he leaned back, his face red, his eyes watery and swollen. "Thanks."

"Any time. Uhm, doctor, I still am going to have to arrest you for breaking out of jail... I hope you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind, you're just doing your job. Thank you for talking to me."

"Uhm... yes, you're welcome. Uh, listen, how about we make a little deal?"

"What do you mean?"

"I come and visit you about once a week whilst you're serving your time, you can talk to me, and in exchange you agree not to try and take over the Eastern Seaboard anymore. Okay?"

Shockwave paused. "Well... I do still want to control it..."

"I want to be naked in a hot tub with the Scarlet Squirrel, but you don't see me kidnapping her, do you?"

"Say... That gives me an..."

"DOCTOR!"

"All right, all right, you have a deal. You come and talk to me and I'll try and go straight."

"Goody." ShadowFox hefted the doctor off the platform, and retracted the tendrils supporting him. "Now let's get to it, doctor. The sooner you're in police custody, the sooner I'm home and in the shower."



# The 'Dogs of War

**Christopher Williams**

Chuff stood at the entrance to his neighborhood and surveyed the cratered surface of the plains around him. There was an uncharacteristic sense of melancholy surrounding the adolescent pup as he thought about the future — specifically his own. He felt a soft nuzzle on his back announcing the presence of his littermate.

"A fine day, isn't it, Giff?" Chuff asked without turning. He'd been aware of his brother's approach, but had given no notice until they were touching, as was the custom among his kind.

"Yes, truly it is. The adults are going to come out later and do some weeding." The adults were always going on about weeding their little town, removing inedible plants that the wind saw fit to germinate there, but both pups knew that it was just for show. What they really wanted was to come up and enjoy the fine weather, to roll about and tumble and play. "Have you changed your mind? You're still welcome to come with us."

"I haven't changed my mind," Chuff assured.

"But it's dangerous," Giff protested. "You could be hurt!"

"When was the last time you heard of an adult buck injuring a young challenger?" Chuff laughed, "No, it's you I worry about. Being a pioneer is hard work, and really dangerous."

Giff began absently stroking his brother's fur. Chuff stopped talking and enjoyed the attention, then returned the favor. Their serious discussion forgotten, they began tousling each other, then wrestling, and finally tumbled out into the sun, scampering and playing.

Their play was eventually disrupted by a series of shrill whistles from their neighbors. Everyone stopped what they were doing and dashed madly, diving into whatever hole was nearest. The brothers sat and watched as a winged shadow passed over them, feeling a chill as the hawk gave a frustrated, hungry cry that seemed to find its way into their very marrow. In the hush that followed. Chuff spoke.

"You see? What will you do without the Outsiders to give warning? If you'd been out pioneering just now, you'd be hawk-food."

"It won't be that bad. The Outsiders survive, after all."

"Yes, but soon you'll BE an Outsider," Chuff pointed out.

"That's the way things work. I know it isn't going to be easy, but I think it'll be worth it. There's just something... magical about looking at something and knowing 'I did that; that's mine!' To be able to stand out above your neighborhood and yip. So we'll have to keep watch — I'm proud to even think about having that sort of responsibility. Look at the adults — they haven't a care in the world because they live within the protection of our town, while those who live at the edge watch for predators and keep them safe. I've heard what Khon says, and..."

"I wouldn't worry about what Khon says, brother-mine. He's just an eager young buck, full of himself."

"This from my brother the Conqueror," Giff laughed as he cautiously poked his head out of the tunnel just as the all clear was sent. The two joined in the joyous yipping, an evocation that seemed to start in their toes and work its way up their spines, emerging from their throats only after awakening every nerve along the way. It was a sound that said, "I am here, I am here," and in it was conveyed a mixture of territory and identity. When it was over, Giff gave his brother a playful shove, and dashed down the tunnel. "Come on, I'll race you home."



"So, where will you go?" Giff asked as Chuff prepared to leave. There was no denying that the time had come for them to be off. Chuff was already receiving looks from the males that were, if not threatening, then at least not inviting, and they could feel a tension in the air. He was also finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate when certain females were nearby, and he'd been warned early on what that meant. Giff, too, knew that it was time for his brave expedition to start their labors, before they missed the strong rains that would make the soil soft enough to work.

"Oh, there's a nice neighborhood near here I've had my eye on," Chuff answered casually, as though he were speaking of some particularly

appealing plant he was considering eating, "You know old Chad's neighborhood?"

"Old Chad's not that old, you know. Besides, he's popular. They might not accept you there."

"If they don't, I can always try elsewhere."

"And if that doesn't work out, you're always welcome with us," Giff offered.

"You speak for everyone?"

Giff gave his brother a playful shove. "I'm sure I do."

Chuff smiled. "Planning on being top buck of your neighborhood, once it's built?"

"No, I don't think I'm cut out for that sort of thing," Giff admitted with a shake of his head. "I'm happy enough just to be what I am."

"That's what I envy about you, Giff. Would that we were all born under such a guiding star. I sometimes wish I could just be happy with what life gives me."

"Promise me that if things don't work out, you'll come find us?" Giff pressed.

"I promise." With a final tousle of his brother's fur. Chuff hurried off to test his destiny.



He was for the most part ignored as he made his way to Chad's neighborhood, though he was sent firmly on his way whenever discovered. There was no real animosity shown, just an implicit understanding that he was unwelcome. Finally, he crossed the scent boundary he was looking for. Now his trial would begin.

Luck was against him, it seemed. The first person he came across happened to be Chad himself. They approached each other, giving each other the brief nuzzling social customs dictated. Chad got right to the point as soon as they were finished, however. "Well, get on with you, then. Out the way you came." Chuff complied, in no real hurry, and Chad saw him off to the scent boundary.

Chuff ducked aboveground, then re-entered through another hole. He was a bit more fortunate this time, encountering a pair of females. They sounded the alarm immediately after they exchanged nuzzled greetings, and Chuff led Chad a merry chase before finally being expelled again. He returned to the surface, and once again tried another opening.

His brother had been right. Chad was a popular buck. Chuff's test was to win the affections of the neighborhood females, but by the end of the week, he seemed no closer to his goal. To make matters worse, he had to continue provoking Chad, a task which allowed neither of them to rest for more than a few moments. There were times when the young buck had lost his bearings underground and stumbled toward his pursuer instead of away — still, no blows were exchanged. This was a contest of stamina, not of strength; despite all of Giff's apprehensions. Chuff hadn't imagined that the elder prairie dog would have such astounding reserves of energy, but somehow he still seemed clear-eyed and alert, despite Chuff's harrying.

A few more days passed, and Chuff was almost dead on his feet. Chad was showing signs of slowing at last, but Chuff didn't know if he could push himself to take advantage of it. Ejected from the neighborhood for what may well have been the thousandth time, he doggedly stumbled toward another hole. Halfway there, he tripped and sprawled on the ground. The sun-warmed earth beneath him, the faint breeze ruffling his fur, and the gentle pressure of the sun beating down on him felt so inviting that he lay in the open for a while resting. He heard the distant whistles with less than half his mind, the rest of his attention devoted entirely to the delightful sensation of simply not moving for a moment. It was only when a dark shape passed in front of the sun that he realized the danger he was in.

He struggled to move, his body arguing with him, weighing the possibility of death versus the energy it would take get below ground. He realized with a shock that he was measuring his life against a few seconds of rest, and how closely they vied. This shock and raw terror finally overcame his lethargy, and he pulled himself toward a hole, falling inside and tumbling down to land at the feet of a young female. He looked up at her, still horrified at the thought of what had almost happened — of what he'd almost allowed to happen.

They sat there for a long moment — he heaving in his exhaustion, she just silently watching him. He watched her staring at him, unmoving, and all the fear and frustration of several days came to a head. "What's the matter with

you!" He finally screamed, "What do I have to do? I just nearly died..." The female dashed away the moment he raised his voice. Chuff let the cool earthen wall of the tunnel drain away his rage, and he closed his eyes and permitted himself to sleep at last.

When he woke. Chad was standing beside him. Chuff began to wearily pull himself to his feet, and was surprised when the older prairie dog gave him a helping paw.

"It's over, isn't it?" He asked, and Chad just nodded. Chuff leaned against the wall and let himself slowly slide back down, realizing his mistake. The female hadn't raised the alarm. He'd been given his first chance, and he'd been too exhausted and shaken to see it. Chad left, knowing he had nothing to fear.

"I can try again." Chuff told himself. But the idea of starting over, of enduring another marathon, made his body ache. He climbed out into the evening air, and rolled over to gaze into the sky. "Maybe being an Outsider wouldn't be so bad." But then he thought of his terror again — and the thought of never knowing, of always watching, filled him with dread. "Maybe... Maybe I'll just wait here, and see what happens." Above, the stars drifted among the clouds like tiny hawks, inviting him.





# Many Years from Now - Part One

by Tim Susman

illustrations by Karena Kliefoth

I'd do anything to get him back." She sighed. "Marsha, you don't know - it's like there's a huge hole in my heart. I've felt empty since he left, like my nights have no moon and the light's gone out of the sun. I don't know what to do."

She squeezed my paw gently. "That's beautiful, Andy. It was even more beautiful when Andrea Dorne said it in *'My Lover's Tail'*."

